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(Para)Normalizing the Patriarchy: How Supernatural Pregnancy Storylines Shape Perceptions of
Motherhood and Bodily Autonomy for Women in *Angel*, 1999-2004

by

Haley Strassburger

Under the Direction of Megan Sinnott, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2023

ABSTRACT

Bridging ideas presented in contemporary media analysis and feminist theory, the research presented herein investigates the representations of pregnancy within *Angel* in order to draw conclusions about the lasting impacts of these story arcs for both the women who fall victim to these violent possessions and pregnancies and the male characters who bear witness as well. Extending this analysis outside of the interpersonal conflicts that emerge between these fictional characters, this thesis argues that these pregnancy storylines serve as a “shibboleth of death” that extends past the minutiae of these characters’ lives and deaths to influence their legacies, or lack thereof. This usage of “shibboleth” highlights the mere mention of pregnancy as an automatic signifier of death for the women of *Angel*; both on screen and beyond, women are held captive by their reproductive capabilities and exploited for the gains of their male counterparts even after their deaths.

INDEX WORDS: Horror, Media analysis, Patriarchy, Pregnancy, Reproductive justice

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Motherhood and Bodily Autonomy for Women in *Angel*, 1999-2004

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May 2023

DEDICATION

This thesis is truly a labor of love; between countless hours of research, multiple rewatches of *Angel*, and an abundance of passionate discussions on this topic, none of this work would have been possible without the unwavering support and care that I have received from my family. My family in this case is twofold. I extend my gratitude to my mother, who has served as a constant sounding board for a plethora of my theories, and with whom I first began my obsession with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, through mail-delivery DVDs from Netflix back in 2012. I also want to recognize my “found family”— the digital world of Elysian Fields, which has given me not only a space for fervent fandom discussions and comprehensive analyses of these stories, but, most importantly, a place to become the most authentic version of myself.

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1 INTRODUCTION

“Not by chance is the possessed body essentially female,” wrote Michel de Certeau in 1975, and though his theorizing drew largely from philosophical discussions and historical texts such as plays and medical descriptions of hysteria, the same is true today, albeit presented more frequently in television and film productions than written texts. The trope of the mystical pregnancy and possessed womb, ranging in application from horror movies, supernatural television series, and media analyses of the aforementioned genres, casts women as mere vessels within these stories. These women are, inevitably, both defined and damned by the existence of another being (whether its origin is natural, supernatural, or a mix of the two) occupying spaces within their bodies. Beginning with the co-opting of Christian themes in the famous film *Rosemary’s Baby*, subverting not only the “divine” language of Jesus’ birth to the Virgin Mary but also the “miraculous” birth of Buddha and other pre-Christian conception stories into a horror setting, these tales offer us a precedent of religious and cultural underpinnings within contemporary pregnancy storylines. The portrayals of pregnant women therein, and the fetuses which inhabit their wombs, speak to long-standing beliefs about the prioritization of birth and the subsequent diminishing of bodily autonomy. Through an exploration of late-20th and early-21st century supernatural fiction, this thesis will explore how the usage of pregnancy as a vehicle for plot or character development may offer new interpretations on contemporary debates around feminine agency in popular media and the continuing fight for reproductive justice. In particular, the pregnancy arcs within *Angel* demonstrate a growing emphasis on the fetal subjects themselves, while systemically minimizing the role of the mother or gestational figure; this concept of privileging the fetus above the mother can be a dangerous one, particularly in the context of reproductive justice legislation, as it casts the fetus as paragons of innocence while

opening the door for criminalization of mothers who may seek reproductive or abortive care. Examples of this can be seen in recent court cases, particularly in light of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* via the Supreme Court's landmark decision on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* in the summer of 2022; at least 38 states have homicide laws that recognize fetuses as subjects, and these laws are often written in ways that can deem miscarriages as an act of intentional murder, thereby punishing and imprisoning women who suffer tragic pregnancy loss under the guise of upholding the nebulous concept of "fetal personhood."¹ Though these often-ambiguous laws existed prior to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the attacks on reproductive rights have already begun to increase in the year since this decision; with this sudden rise in legislation that emphasizes the idea of fetal personhood, it is perhaps more important than ever to consider pieces of popular media that have reinforced these ideas for decades.

In 1999, following the success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the spin-off television series *Angel* debuted, centering on the titular male vampire character, a predominantly-male cast, and a film-noir aesthetic. These stylistic and contextual changes came in vivid contrast to *Buffy's* female-centric plotline, emphasis on human- and semi-human empowerment, and overall optimism and humor. Within a five-season run, *Angel* depicts multiple pregnancy storylines from a variety of supernatural natures, ranging from episodic to season-long arcs. Despite elements of variations within each— some feature human characters, other feature vampires, and others still involve the birth of immortal and vengeful gods— all result in a bitter end for the pregnant woman. As the "child" that each character bears— ranging from a human son, to a rogue deity, to an ancient warrior— becomes increasingly visible, the pregnant female is shifted to the

¹ For more information on this concept, I would recommend exploring the below resource from *The Marshall Project*, which outlines the complex applications of "fetal personhood" legislation and linguistics: <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/09/01/they-lost-their-pregnancies-then-prosecutors-sent-them-to-prison>

periphery, existing solely as a host/vessel for the masculine-coded, dominant, and often-parasitic creature within. This idea of competing subjectivity— a struggle for dominance between the pregnant female and the fetus within her— is explored further below via the works of theorist Erin Harrington; in all aforementioned cases within the universe of *Angel*, the battle for power and recognition is won, inevitably, by the fetal subject, once again reinforcing the consistent and near-instantaneous subjugation of the pregnant mother in favor of the fetus.

Analyzing popular media— and, in particular, pieces of media that draw heavily upon the cultural and social movements of their selected era— requires not only an understanding of the media itself, and the complexities inherent to portraying current trends through a fictional medium, but also the ability to view the creators, actors, and audience through a critical lens. Through an application of sociologist Stuart Hall’s theory of “encoding” and “decoding” within television programming, a feminist study of the horror genre, and a discussion of modern reproductive justice movements in America— in light of the summer 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* case that overturned *Roe v. Wade*— this thesis explores what, if any, impact these pregnancy storylines may have on a larger scale than merely audience enjoyment or disdain. Though it is perhaps a reach to suggest that *Angel* has had any significant influence on the real-world issue of reproductive justice, it goes without saying that the media we choose to watch may often reflect the values we hold dear. In this case, *Angel*’s emphasis on uplifting fetal subjects while inversely subjugating its female characters serves as a poignant reminder of how America, at large, privileges and romanticizes the fetus while demonizing the mother— even in the case of the monstrous fetuses of *Angel* that cast their maternal vessels as perpetual victims. This thesis was born out of two primary desires— one, to engage, through a media analysis lens, with some of the current issues surrounding reproductive justice following a

rise in anti-choice legislation, and two, to celebrate my love for the series *Angel* while reckoning with its on-screen and behind-the-scenes failures to critically discuss feminist issues, particularly given its status as a spin-off of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The research herein is focused on the possibility of media not only to reflect the power structures of its given time, but to discover how media may hold its own unique power to push back against hegemonic and oppressive ideas of feminism, pregnancy, and bodily autonomy.

Two key concepts arise in the study and subsequent analysis of all three pregnancy tropes in *Angel*; for clarity, I have chosen to explain them here and provide further contextualization in the following chapters. First is the idea of female subjectivity— the idea of centering a woman as the subject of a particular narrative, rather than adopting a somewhat-neutral objective stance and relying on generalizations that often arise from the more prevalent and historically-dominant male perspectives; though this concept originates in psychology, I am relying primarily on discussions of this framework within the lens of contemporary media analysis. In the masculinist confines of *Angel*, this subjectivity is effectively and rather-expeditiously terminated by the addition of a pregnancy to the female characters' storylines. In these arcs, the newly-introduced fetal being (whether it be a semi-human son, a higher power fallen from grace, or a demonic deity) quickly subsumes the female subject and establishes *itself* as the new dominant figure— rendering the mother figure decimated through violence, death, and abject dismissal in its wake. The field of pregnant subjectivity (and, by extension, fetal subjectivity) is explored further in my literature review, drawing primarily from Erin Harrington's *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*, in which the author posits that, because of androcentric theories of the self throughout history, the pregnant body has *always* existed outside of the realm of the individual— it “starts as one, becomes more-than-one, then becomes one again” (Harrington 2018, 90). The women of

Angel, however, are never allowed to return to their original states— they invariably are eliminated, in one way or another, without being given the chance to re-establish an individual identity at the conclusion of their pregnancy arc, a concept which gives way to the second, and perhaps most definitive, through-line of my thesis.

The other consistent factor across *Angel*'s three primary pregnancy storylines is something that I have termed as the *shibboleth of death*. I have coined this phrase to encapsulate the nature of these fictional pregnancies as vehicles of character destruction— whether in the literal sense of sudden character death, or in the more metaphorical sense of destabilizing a character's established ideology and overall development. My usage and application of this phrase draws upon the Biblical idea of "shibboleth," a simplified reference or descriptor for a set of beliefs, which serves to distinguish a group of people, or a set of traditions/customs, from another.² However, I also drew inspiration from economist and Nobel Prize-laureate Paul Samuelson's usage of the term, who questioned whether "shibboleth" may in fact refer instead to an idea for which "the means becomes the end, and the letter of the law takes precedence over the spirit."³ In other words, the emphasis is less on the *meaning* of the shibboleth itself, and more on its existence in the first place; my particular application of this term suggests that the canonical collusion between impregnation and death for female characters within the series speaks primarily to a blatant disregard for how these storylines may discuss female bodily autonomy and a continuation of the dissolving of female subjectivity, rather than offering

² The word "shibboleth" was used as a literal code word in the Book of Judges by the warring Gileadites to identify and isolate Ephraimites when the latter attempted to flee across the River Jordan. The Gileadites demanded that the travelers pronounce the word "shibboleth" to gain entry into the occupied land, but the Ephraimites "could not frame to pronounce it right" due to a dialectic difference that resulted in the word sounding like "sibboleth" instead (Judges 12:5-6).

³ Samuelson, Paul A. "When it is ethically optimal to allocate money income in stipulated fractional shares." In *Natural Resources, Uncertainty, and General Equilibrium Systems: Essays in Memory of Rafael Lusk*. New York: Academic Press, pp. 175–195 (1977).

viewers a more nuanced study on the complex nature of reproduction within a paranormal setting. In my application of this term, pregnancy is an automatic signifier and enforcer of a female character's inevitable death to follow, regardless of the possible variations between pregnancy storylines for each of the characters impacted by these experiences. The analysis that follows, through a study of the three primary pregnancy arcs of *Angel* and contemporary scholarship within the horror genre, explores the application of these two key concepts in systemically undercutting the ostensible veneer of feminist sensibilities within this beloved series.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The story of a woman impregnated via spiritual or supernatural forces finds its origins in the story of (as her name suggests) the Virgin Mary and the birth of the baby Jesus, cultural movements of mysticism across Africa and Asia, and ever-evolving discussions of gender, infertility, and spiritual possession throughout religious and secular history. Though it is certainly not the first or most unique of its kind, the Christian and Catholic traditions of Mary's pregnancy at the hands of God informs much of the contemporary pregnancy storylines consumed by American audiences— and this statement rings true, in particular, for popular works within the genre of paranormal and horror media. Centering on feminist analyses of pregnancy and sexual reproduction, as well the horror genre as a whole, this thesis draws from various theorists, analysts, and critical reviews of media (including perspectives from the fields of film and literature studies) to explore how the television series *Angel* utilizes tropes of forced motherhood and birth to para-normalize (a term co-opted from Annika Herb's writings on rape culture in popular young adult books, to be explained in further depth in this literature review) the issues of consent, conception, and bodily autonomy for female leads and their male- and male-coded progeny. These contemporary horror and supernatural texts, and the interpretations of their treatment of women therein, draw heavily from 20th century cultural movements and popular media; this thesis seeks to offer new insights into how motherhood, birth, and bodily autonomy are subjugated by patriarchal standards and hegemonic beliefs of womanhood, identity, and perpetual innocence of fetal subjects (as reinforced by the emphasis on fetal subjectivity while condemning the maternal figures who birth them), in the works of fiction that inspired *Angel* and beyond.

A brief note before I begin: it is important to recognize that while reproductive rights are often central to feminist and activist movements, *not* all people who identify as women are able to reproduce or carry children to term, whether because of biological reasons or personal choice; nor, of course, do all people with “AFAB” (assigned female at birth) genetic characteristics and reproductive organs identify as women. Discussions of sex, procreation, and reproduction should always be approached with care and respect, particularly when queer identities, and issues of transgender bodily autonomy are involved; special attention must also be paid to non-normative genetic and medical conditions that may affect an individual’s ability to become pregnant, and conditions that may impact fertility. However, the text that I have chosen to analyze (*Angel*), as well as the majority of scholarly writings on the subject, deal largely within cisgender and heteronormative patterns, so in accordance with these sources, I will be primarily focusing on their depictions of women as individuals who are capable of birthing children; in these texts, sexual and reproductive *agency* are primary topics of discussion, but trans-centric reproductive justice narrative are excluded. As such, in fitting with the terminology of my source material, I will use the phrasing of “woman” and “women” to refer to individuals with the genetic and biological capacity to carry children, while still requiring insemination of some kind in order to produce viable fetuses. This decision was not made lightly, and I felt it necessary to include this disclaimer before launching into further discussions of bodily autonomy, particularly with respect to ongoing battles for reproductive rights and healthcare access that often exclude trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse voices from the narratives.⁴ The source material and scholarly writings I have engaged with in the literature review below firmly establish a significant connection between the identities of pregnant characters as *women* and their marginalization by

⁴ For more information on how issues of reproductive justice and transgender inclusivity often overlap, I would recommend the editorial “Inclusion is Not Erasure” in the September 2022 issue of *Contemporary OB/GYN*.

male counterparts, so I have proceeded in a similar vein in conducting my own analysis of the texts.

2.1 PREGNANCY AND PRECEDENT: *ROSEMARY'S BABY*

Perhaps the best, and most critically-acclaimed, usage of the mystical pregnancy trope comes in the 1968 film *Rosemary's Baby*, and the 1967 book of the same name, which centers on a young woman impregnated by the devil, without her knowledge or consent, in exchange for her husband's successes in film. A decade later, the *Alien* franchise (with the first film's release in 1979) sparked a science fiction trend a similar vein, with an extraterrestrial creature terrorizing a spacecraft; the third installment finds Sigourney Weaver's Ripley Scott impregnated with an Alien Queen embryo, leading to Scott's self-sacrifice to avoid the release of the alien entity. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, the horror genre preyed upon fears of pregnancy-gone-wrong, demonic children, and the metaphorical (or literal) explosion of the nuclear family, while playing off of relevant American abortion legislation, feminist movements for autonomy, and increased debates over reproductive justice. Because of the large scope of topics and themes used to construct horror narratives, and to best frighten or influence their audiences, the works of fiction that utilize pregnancy storylines can produce a variety of interpretations, assumptions, and perceptions of this trope in contemporary culture. The media selected for this thesis range from the mid-to-late 20th century to the early 21st century, and this 50-year span allows for an evolution in perspectives around reproduction, religion, and supernatural horror.

Speaking first about the nature of horror films— and how these pieces of media often are heavily influenced by the cultural events of the generations that produce them— we must consider which facets of horror stories (in particular, their central villains and monstrous foes) have found themselves concrete places within the genre's canon, and what these themes might

suggest about the role of media as not only a mirror of societal trends but a possible indicator of future movements as well. The popularity of the horror genre itself was birthed out of global tensions and grief following the Second World War and the rising animosities under Cold War regimes, but the era was quickly dominated by a rise in science-fiction horror hybrids that reflected a fear of increased technological advancement. Space-themed horror films— like *The Thing from Another World* (1951), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956/1978), and *Alien* (1979)— spoke to global fears about the great unknown, while the rising popularity of slashers in the 1970s and 1980s— *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984)— revealed moviegoers’ fears about horror infiltrating idyllic settings like summer camps and close-knit neighborhoods. Even more modern and genre-bending films— like *Get Out* (2017), *Hereditary* (2018), and *Midsommar* (2019), among others— suggest that trends are shifting away from the heroes fending off against a single monster, and towards outright depicting global issues (social injustices, fake news, media manipulation, etc) through on-screen messaging. Every example above— and, as central to this thesis, the case study of *Rosemary’s Baby* herein— demonstrates that the rhetorics of horror, in the words of Ken Gelder, circulate broadly and produce their own way of defining, and re-defining, cultural production with each new installment.

Focusing a microanalytic lens on both the novel and film of *Rosemary’s Baby*, and its relation to 1960s American politics, in order to explore a more specific example of the ways in which media analysis incorporates historical contextualization of the horror genre, I turn to Karyn Valerius’s 2005 “*Rosemary’s Baby*, Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects.” While this text largely centers *Rosemary’s Baby*, Valerius’s inclusion of Donna Haraway, Jack (also known as Judith) Halberstam, and Judith Butler throughout the text and in the extensive reference

section indicates a reliance on second- and third-wave feminist thinking, as the second-wave feminist movement was taking shape across America in the 1960s— focusing primarily on issues of wage inequality and reproductive justice— when both Levin’s book and Polanski’s film were released. *Rosemary’s Baby* was published only 6 years prior to the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling on both *Doe v. Bolton* and *Roe v. Wade*, which solidified a woman’s right to privacy and federal protections for abortion access, and neither the novel or film are ignorant to movements around reproductive rights— though an analysis of Rosemary herself suggests that this is not solely a feminist issue.

In *Rosemary’s Baby*, perhaps the most pervasive force (other than Rosemary’s unending yearning for a child, regardless of the physical, emotional, or supernatural costs) is that of the patriarchy, and the underpinnings of Christian and Catholic ideology within it. First, the naming of its central character, Rosemary, combines “rose” (a flower, often associated with ideas of love, innocence, and picture-perfect femininity) with “Mary,” evocative of the Virgin Mary’s divine pregnancy and the subsequent birth of the baby Jesus. In keeping with this religious imagery, Rosemary is a lapsed Catholic from the Midwest, while her husband is staunchly opposed to organized religion— that is, except for the Satanic cult he joins in order to elevate his film career. The cult’s fervor for Rosemary’s pregnancy, too, mimics religious themes of a child born to bring salvation; though, in this case, her demonic offspring seeks to end the world, rather than become its hero. However, the analysis of linguistics and character name choices cannot be simplified to its religious connotations; the title itself, *Rosemary’s Baby*, places the emphasis not on Rosemary but on her child instead, who is only seen in the final chapter of the novel, and the ending scenes of the film. A number of articles refer to Rosemary Woodhouse as the titular character in the novel and film, whether discussing gender within the horror genre or engaging

unrelated topics; however, Rosemary is *not* the titular character, despite being the protagonist. The child, conceived through rape and a violation of Rosemary's bodily autonomy, is instead the key subject; Rosemary's "position as subject is decentered, if not eradicated... by the idea that Rosemary herself is little more than a physical vessel" (Harrington 2018, 214). Her pregnancy, which wreaks havoc on her body and her interpersonal relationships, largely eliminates her own independent characterization and ability to preserve her health; despite the extensive trauma, both physical and psychological, that Rosemary endures throughout the novel and film, the story concludes with her loving embrace of her child, reflecting the "essentialist conflation of women with maternity"—and minimizing the violation of Rosemary's body while, conversely, suggesting that her pro-life leanings and refusal to abort led to the rise of a Satanic power while promoting the idea of motherhood at any cost (Valerius 2005, 119).

Rosemary's identity factors—her religious background, her whiteness, her bourgeois class status—offer her immense levels of privilege, but she is held prisoner (both literally, in the narrow confines of her apartment building, and figuratively, through her husband's sly coercion and manipulations) by her role as a woman within a patriarchal society. In the story's climax, as the child is ready to enter the world, she begins to have doubts over her impending labor and seeks out a second medical opinion, but the doctor is quick to dismiss her concerns, likely because he associates her anxieties with female hysteria and paranoia— even Rosemary's beliefs about her own body are relentlessly doubted and disbelieved. Her story of assault, pregnancy, and uneasy maternity— despite being couched in fiction and fantasy— is not an uncommon one for its era. Not only does the patriarchy take shape around her, but she too internalizes its teachings; in a rare conversation between her and her other female friends, she is quick to declare she "won't have an abortion"— as if the mere thought was sinful in its own right (Levin 1967,

171). Her pregnancy is a wanted one, unlike many women who choose to abort, but its devastating effects on her body, and the traumatic nature of her insemination, would likely qualify her for abortion access despite a lack of federal protections at the time: “not only was she raped, but the pregnancy compromises her physical health, while the third circumstance—potential birth defects—is established through anachronism” (Valerius 2005, 125). Like many women of the era, Rosemary is described as worrying heavily about the health of her baby, even refusing pharmaceutical options that would allow her own symptoms to subside in favor of protecting the child that, in all conceivable ways, is slowly killing her—though she does exercise choice here, it is one that lacks informed consent, which comes as little surprise, given the overwhelming lack of emphasis placed upon agency and autonomy in reproductive care during this period. The Supreme Court had only recently declared that married couples deserved protected access to contraceptives in 1965, two years before the book was published, and contraceptive care to unmarried couples wouldn’t be federally protected until 1972. Abortion procedures during this era were not only difficult to access but often dangerous from both a physical and legal standpoint; Rosemary’s vehement refusal of an abortion likely stemmed from fear around the possible complications, as well as a heavy dose of internalized patriarchal beliefs.

Rosemary’s Baby holds immense cultural significance in conversations around horror, particularly for the involvement of women as protagonists and pregnancy as an inciting incident, and fellow scholar Sean Quinlan adapts this idea into a holistic understanding of the horror genre’s growing popularity throughout the late 20th century. Horror films skyrocketed into popularity in the mid-1960s, following an overall increase in television viewership and access to broadcasting; with the Kennedy era in full swing, and post-war uncertainty on the minds of many Americans, the concept of “progressive liberal-humanism” in politics soon infiltrated popular

media (Quinlan 2014, 326). Religious horror media, like that of *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist* (which also features a child, though Regan's demonic possession occurs during her pre-teen years), and other late 20th century films, re-centered the fictional tropes of demonic possession of a young woman into a weaponized "metaphysical critique" of the sociopolitical tensions of America during the period (Quinlan 2014, 318). As stated earlier, Rosemary herself is a lapsed Catholic, married to a non-religious television celebrity who later participates in Satanic rituals. Amidst Rosemary's inner turmoil and anxieties about her pregnancy, the sexual assault at the hands of her husband, and rumors of her neighbors' tendencies towards witchcraft (whose both physical proximity and smothering closeness overwhelm her throughout the book), the book touches on events like the Pope's visit to New York, the citywide power failures, the Kennedy assassination, civil rights movements, and more. The novel, film, and accompanying discourses effortlessly blend the personal and the political, suggesting that the second-wave feminist movement's slogan stretches out of protest marches and into media portrayals of women's identities, even— or perhaps especially so— within the grotesque and gothic nature of horror.

2.2 SUPERNATURAL SUBJECTS: A LOOK AT WOMEN IN HORROR

The genre of horror is by all definitions expansive, ranging from decades of gruesome slashers, to the relatively new subset of Black horror like Jordan Peele's 21st century oeuvre, and the aptly-named emerging field of gynae horror to which *Rosemary's Baby* belongs (and largely defines). However, the genre at large has faced analytical debates over its legitimacy within the popular sphere, its possible sociocultural effects (with some critics eager to deem it capable of inciting real-life violence), and often weak representations of diversity on screens both American and international. Perhaps the most thorough analysis of the complexities of this genre is *The Horror Reader* (2000, edited by Ken Gelder), a collection of 29 essays that cover a wide variety

of subgenres, rhetorics, and historical evolutions that support the turn-of-the-century text's emphasis on pluralisms— both in how horror is presented and in how it is perceived— particularly when considering the impact of horror themes on the human psyche as discussed in Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Expanding upon these ideas, along with the aid of gender-focused analytic texts— including Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992, updated in 2015), Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), and Erin Harrington's *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film* (2018)— my study of *Angel*'s portrayal of pregnant women seeks to further emphasize a variety of existing themes in horror, as well as how such themes may be reconstructed within this selected supernatural media. Though this is certainly not an exhaustive list, these themes include pregnant and fetal subjectivity (explored below), abjection, demonic possession, patriarchal control, internalized misogyny, and fears around reproductive processes. I draw much of my inspiration (as well as a portion of this thesis' title) from the term “para-normalization,” as coined by Annika Herb in her 2021 article “(Para)Normalizing Rape Culture: Possession as Rape in Young Adult Paranormal Romance,” focusing on the cultural discourses surrounding girlhood and rape culture in paranormal fantasy novels. Herb utilizes this phrasing— a combination of “normalizing” (making something conform to a standard of acceptability) and “paranormal” (referring to media or events that are beyond the scope of normative scientific understanding)— to suggest that these novels use the guise of fantasy fiction to either force the “reader into submission or afford them the opportunity to critique” these dominating structures (Herb 2021, 69). Instead of casting a net of normalcy over rape culture and the romanticization of intimate partner violence, as seen in the

examples presented by Herb, my thesis focuses on the normalization of pregnancy as a vehicle of subjugation and masculinist control within these supernatural sources.

In determining what roles women may serve in the horror genre, and the significance of frequent stereotyping and trope-casting within this media, the role of the “final girl” is often considered to be an outlier. This oft-popularized contemporary phrasing of “final girl” as the hero of horror films is largely a misnomer, or at least one that fails to recognize the complexity of the role. Carol J. Clover explores these naming conventions in her 2015 text *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (originally published in 1992), where she suggests that the celebrated title of the “final girl” is diminutive, often disregarding that the female heroine spent the majority of the film in terror, fleeing from her captor. Clover suggests that a more appropriate term would be “victim-hero” or “tortured survivor”— or, since many horror films minimize the woman’s strength and recontextualize their triumphs as accidents or happenstance, the “accidental survivor” (Clover 2015, x). However, neither the source material of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* nor its spin-off *Angel* feature on a “final girl” in the traditional sense; *Buffy* was created as a subversion of the “slashers prefer blondes” trope, in which a stereotypical blonde character is often the first to die at the hands of the villain in a horror film, and though there are many female fighting characters in both series, none fit the famed trope. *Angel*, as a series, features a shocking number of deaths of its already limited cast of female characters, an issue that I will elaborate on further in the final section of this literature review.

However, aside from this “final girl” theory, Clover also theorizes about other archetypes and stereotypes that women, particularly when pregnancy or motherhood dominate their storylines, may occupy within horror media. When discussing tales of bodily possession and exorcism in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, Clover emphasizes what she calls the “dual focus

narrative,” in which many pieces of horror media alternate “between the story of female possession on one hand and the story of male crisis on the other”; in the case of *Rosemary’s Baby*, Guy’s desire for success in the film industry at any cost leads directly to his wife’s demonic pregnancy, and she suffers greatly in order for him to thrive (Clover 2015, 70). Moving further, Clover posits that in these narratives, women’s bodies are often “vessels” or orifices to be “penetrated, invaded, and colonized” fitting within a variety of archetypal horror stories, women are treated as mere objects for male consumption, whether at the hands of a demonic entity that gains the upper hand or merely through the standard ideas of sexual submission and impregnation (Clover 80). These women— both figuratively and literally, given the treatment of their physical forms— are repeatedly and perpetually controlled and manipulated for the benefit of an external male figure.

After the initial trauma of abuse or possession is concluded, the woman’s body remains a site of objectification and close observation; in *The Exorcist*, Regan’s body is probed by doctors for an explanation of her unruly behavior, and *Rosemary’s Baby* features a distressed Rosemary returning to her obstetrician repeatedly seeking answers for the immense pain she experiences throughout her pregnancy. In both cases, the medical professionals (typically male in these stories, further demonstrating a hierarchy not only of professionalism in a chosen field, but reputability compared to the easily-doubted women seeking aid) find no root cause, and their concerns are dismissed easily; women’s medical complaints are dismissed as frivolity and hysteria, and no more frequently than in instances of pregnancy, when hormonal imbalances become the easy scapegoat to cast away nearly all of the women’s grievances. Pregnant women may take up more space on screen, but their role as unreliable and overemotional narrators of their own stories perhaps also grows exponentially (like the fetal subjects within them) in the

viewers' eyes; in the case of horror media, there is likely a fictional justification for their bodies' objectifications, but the themes presented in these films carry immense weight into reality. The pregnant body is a site of invasion not only by the male characters who assault and impregnate them, but also by the world at large— parenting websites like *Motherly* describe the magnetic pull of a pregnant belly and explore how the disintegration of social boundaries inspire passerby to insert themselves within a pregnant person's space by touching their bodies and asking questions of an invasive and often-uncomfortable nature, simply because they, as outsiders, deem it acceptable.⁵

In recent years, new theories about horror have not only delved deeper into the role that pregnancy may play within the genre, but have allowed for the creation of an entire sub-genre itself: that of *gynaehorror*, the term coined by theorist Erin Harrington in 2014 and expanded upon in her 2018 publication *Women, Monstrosity, and Horror Film*, referring to films concerned with all aspects of female reproductive horror (reproductive and sexual organs, virginity, pregnancy, birth, motherhood, menopause, etc). Harrington explores how this sub-genre may serve to connect “visual representation and aesthetic expression to wider issues of sociocultural and philosophical analysis,” and discuss whether these depictions may be feminist, anti-feminist, or a unique amalgamation of these two conflicting ideologies (Harrington 2018, 3). Speaking specifically to horror films that engage with pregnancy, rather than other factors of female reproduction, Harrington identifies the crux of the conflict present in most of these examples: the “complicated, sometimes dichotomous relationship between the pregnant-self and the foetal-other” (Harrington 2018, 86). Though many of the films in question emerged following the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 ruling on *Roe v. Wade*, which guaranteed legal

⁵ Spalding, Diana. “Why everyone wants to touch your pregnant belly.” *Motherly*, April 6, 2018. <https://www.mother.ly/life/why-everyone-wants-to-touch-your-pregnant-bellyand-why-it-bothers-you-too/>

protections for and access to abortions, the positioning of fetuses as *characters* (on the same playing field as the pregnant women they inhabit) within these movies may prompt discussions into the role of so-called “pro-life” and “pro-choice” rhetoric, and its impact in fictional forms.

Harrington frequently cites and references the texts of Barbara Creed and Julia Kristeva among others to substantiate her points about feminist cultural and media criticism; in particular, she extrapolates Creed’s work on the monstrous-feminine to suggest that gynaehorror “marks women not only as monsters... but also as victims, heroes and subjects in ways explicitly bound with their femininity, their woman-ness and their reproductive capacities, affects and potentials) (Harrington 7). Creed “shifted away from the female victim and towards the then under-theorised female monster”; her 1993 book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* discusses a variety of relevant gendered concepts— like Freudian theory, the Medusa’s gaze, and archaic crone-like mothers— within her chosen genre, and her disruption of the often-patriarchal boundaries of media analyses is visible in many of Harrington’s own theories and conclusions (Harrington 2018, 3).

For the purposes of this thesis, and with respect to the wide range of topics discussed in Creed’s 1993 text, I have chosen to limit my scope to her text’s fourth chapter, “Woman as Monstrous Womb: *The Brood*,” while also drawing parallels with Kristeva’s 1980 book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, which inspired much of Harrington’s and Clover’s theories above as well. In this selected chapter, Barbara Creed— a professor of cinema studies, who engages primarily with Freudian psychoanalysis and Kristeva’s theories of abjection— explores stories of rape, reproduction, and childbirth, framed largely through a study of the 1979 psychological body horror film *The Brood*. The film follows a psychotherapist who runs the Somafree Institute of Psychoplasmics, a center designed to aid patients in freeing themselves of

various mental ailments by recreating them as physical manifestations, in the form of gruesome childlike creatures known as the “brood.” Nola, the primary patient in the film, reveals to her husband that his own rage about her maternal role has prompted her to create these violent and inhuman creatures; as the Queen Bee of this murderous race, her anguish is passed down to her offspring— “women’s destructive emotions, it seems, are inherited” (Creed 1993, 45). Even as Nora is considered the centerpiece of the film, it is her *womb*— which is placed outside of her body, like a cancerous growth, rather than within it— that is the source of impurity and evil; Nora is a victim of its externalized rage, while also being somewhat complicit in its violence, as the “brood” carry out her unconscious desires. As Creed states in a later analysis of *Alien* and its sequel *Aliens*, engaging with a science-fiction retelling of possession and pregnancy, the woman central to in these stories is invariably “betrayed by her body, unable finally to preserve her own flesh from contamination by the abject, alien other” (Creed 1993, 53). Creed summarizes her discussion into a general and widely-applicable framework of how wombs are represented within horror media: “symbolically in terms of intra-uterine settings”— returning to discussions of Rosemary Woodhouse’s entrapment within the dark confines of her cult-run apartment building, and the representation of the womb as places both “familiar and unfamiliar” to emphasize the idea of a woman’s body as uncanny in three settings (“conception, sexual difference, desire”)— “and literally in relation to the female body”— in which women’s bodies birth monstrous creatures from within their human forms, contradicting the external nature of monstrous construction seen within stories of male mad scientists (Creed 1993, 53-55). Women’s bodies are not only vehicles and vessels of abject ideas in horror, but often the very site and central source of abjection itself.

So, what is this “abject”— and the accompanying theories of abjection— that appears in many of the above analyses and theoretical frameworks? Originated by Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva, who drew inspiration from Freud and Lacan, abjection is a concept in critical theory and social philosophy that discusses the “other,” or “that of being opposed to *I*,” and in horror pertains to anything that disturbs conventional ideas of society and morality (Kristeva 1982, 1). However, the abject, through Kristeva’s lens, is not the “other” in the sense that it is *separate* from the self; instead, the abject lies within us all, to varying degrees and in a variety of forms. There is no separating one’s self from their abject qualities when they are present, and any attempts to try and do so often reemphasize the dominating power of the abject itself, particularly in conversations of pregnancy and maternity; to echo Harrington’s quotation from my introduction, the “other-than-one” self invariably remains. Though the abject can often be somewhat-simply defined as anything disgusting, sickening, or foul, and our responses to such material in horror, it is perhaps most accurately framed as anything that “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982, 4). In the case of horror, particularly in conversations regarding media in the contemporary Western world, this concept is firmly rooted in ideas of Christian morality; women enduring childbirth are seen as unclean, often cruelly reminding (albeit unintentionally) their male counterparts of mortality and human fragility, in a reflection of early “representation[s] of impurity in the Bible,” like parallels between the “unclean maternal body and the decaying body” in Leviticus (Creed 1993, 47). As Creed’s own analysis of Kristeva states: “in this way woman is again linked to the abject through her body” (Creed 1993, 48). Regardless of the interpretive and creative choices utilized within the creation of a gynaeohorror film, the internalization of such abjection, occupying a privileged space within the mother’s body alongside her monstrous womb and/or unborn fetus, remains constant.

A study of the abject requires us to investigate the foundations and impacts of a variety of prevalent dichotomies in the conversation of pregnancy, womanhood, and horror: pure vs. impure, inside vs. outside (often referring to the womb), beautiful vs. hideous, corporeal vs. conceptual, life vs. death, etc. When characters and storylines exist at the crossroads of *both* sides of these spaces, we are forced to cast off our strict delineations of subjects and objects, and seek a more thorough understanding of the abject as a “site at which such meaning and order collapses” to determine what such examples may *mean* for societal analysis and media interpretation, when meaning itself has come undone (Harrington 2018, 95). Here, we return to Erin Harrington’s framework of pregnant subjectivity, as the idea of “self” (subject) vs. “other” (object) no longer strictly applies; instead, we see in cases of pregnancy that “a woman moves from ‘one’, then ‘more-than-one’, to a forever changed ‘one’,” in which the relationship between pregnant women and their fetuses is strongly oppositional rather than symbiotic (Harrington 2018, 14-15). This oppositional dynamic can be demonstrated even in the most mundane of settings, like the advancements of medical imaging and ultrasound technologies, which often “allow the foetus *itself* to be considered as an autonomous subject-entity that exists in competition with its mother, sometimes displacing her entirely”; this uneasy relationship, often positioning the mother’s body in terms of “spaciality,” can further exacerbate the subjugation of women not only at the hands of the men in their vicinity, but as a result of the fetus within them (Harrington 2018, 15).

Moving out of a strictly horror lens and into an anthropological one, as well, we see much of the same trends, particularly in the writings of anthropologist Janice Boddy, whose 1989 book *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* provides an analysis of spiritual possession, both in positive and negative contexts, alongside an ethnographic study

of gender in North Africa. Though it is worth acknowledging that, as a result of rapid socioeconomic and political shifts in the region, many of the practices of Zār spirit possession rites have been abandoned in recent years (as chronicled by Boddy in 2013), the phrasing and ideology present within Zār practices rings true, particularly when translated into discussions of bodily autonomy; within spiritual practices in the Horn of Africa, the Zaryan entity is believed to primarily possess women (often with marital or fertility issues), and largely exist as an ambivalent hitchhiker, though often deemed as the cause to their underlying afflictions. However, these spirits must be appeased and placated, and in doing so these women are given a unique opportunity to challenge their own subjugation and advocate for a pointedly-feminist form of cultural resistance. On the subject of pregnancy, the Zaryan spirits are believed to frequently target married women trying to conceive, effectively holding their womb hostage until demands are met; their bodies are not their own. Given the nature of Zaryan spirits to primarily possess women, and to assert power over their ability to reproduce, it is no surprise— despite the nature of Northern Sudanese women to often consider themselves in a symbiotic dynamic with the Zaryan spirits rather than an antagonistic one— that conception, pregnancy, and birth are often cast within a haze of suspicion, danger, and uncertainty, deeming the women at the center of these tales forever-changed by the inhabitants of their womb.

The themes above, drawn from medical and cultural anthropologist Janice Boddy’s 2-year study in Sudan, are not necessarily unique to her observed experiences, nor are they limited to distant tribes and closed cultural settings; for example, Lesley A. Sharp’s 1994 *The Possessed and the Dispossessed: Spirits, Identity, and Power in a Madagascar Migrant Town* echoes many of Boddy’s findings in an island setting, and Gregg Lahood’s 2007 “Rumors of Angels and Heavenly Midwives: Anthropology of Transpersonal Events and Childbirth” suggests that the

birthing process, too, may offer new insights for cross-cultural understandings of divinity and religiosity during childbirth for both the mother and any men present. The concept of pregnancy, regardless of the time period, community, or location within which it occurs, often serves not only to reflect historical practices and beliefs about sex, birth, and life itself, but to offer us an immensely interdisciplinary space— combining religious beliefs, medical and scientific study, the evolution of cultural outlooks, and even the added influence of contemporary media— to discuss critical issues alongside their long-lasting and multitudinous implications on the maternal subjects, fetal offspring, and even bystanders within these stories.

Though not writing explicitly on pregnancy or maternity— nor discussing tropes unique to horror media— Laura Mulvey, famous feminist film-maker and theorist, also deserves a mention for her influence upon how women are discussed, particularly in comparison to men, in film studies for decades to come. Her seminal work, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” established a belief that there are two central forms of pleasure: **scopophilia** (literally “the love of looking), which is characterized by a voyeuristic and erotic appreciation through unwavering gaze, and **identification**, which is characterized by a viewer’s ability to see themselves mirrored with the male protagonist, or the camera’s own point of view (Mulvey 1975, 9-11). Both position men at the helm; both suggest that female characters are subjugated in order to further male goals, whether subconsciously or consciously. In horror, this takes the form of gratuitous violence (and, most frequently, sexual violence) to cast women as perpetual victims; male viewers retain their gendered status of domination through the men who perpetuate such violence, and female viewers empathize with the victims while also being grateful that, for once, the terrors are contained within the screen. In tales of pregnancy, possession, and horror, we must reckon with the abstract and concrete portrayals of female reproduction, determine what

they suggest about cultural norms and practices, and question where these fictional formats may lead us, in a world still grappling with access to reproductive justice and the right to choose.

2.3 EXPLORING THE “BUFFYVERSE”

Despite the prevalence of research on *Rosemary's Baby*, the horror genre as a whole throughout the 20th century, and 21st century analyses into television adaptations of the aforementioned themes, there is a dearth of scholarship on *Angel* as a piece of media in its own right. What little *does* exist largely contextualizes the show as a spin-off of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, without substantial study of how the show's male-centric narratives serve to destabilize the feminist leanings set forth by the source material. *Buffy* is perhaps the most-studied television series when considering the quantity of scholarly articles published about it, beginning with the first quarterly publication of *Slayage: The Online Journal of Buffy Studies* in 2001 (before either *Buffy* or *Angel* concluded its television run) and continuing with conferences, college courses, and passionate discussion within and beyond traditional academic settings. Why, then, does *Angel* not receive the same treatment? What facets of the spin-off series have resulted in controversy (particularly in terms of gender discrimination and sexual objectification), rather than near-constant adoration, amongst its audience— and how may these factors shape the show's impact, not only as a successor to *Buffy* but in its own right as a genre-defining work of the early 21st century? In order to answer these questions, we must first understand how and why *Angel* was created, and what impact it has had on its genre in the nearly 20 years since its conclusion.

The American television series *Angel* (1999-2004) was a spin-off supernatural drama created by Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt, following the breakout success of Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). While *Buffy* chronicled the titular character's role as a

Slayer— a teenage girl chosen by divine intervention to protect the world from supernatural entities, including vampires and demons— the spin-off series centers on an ensouled vampire named Angel, who seeks to make amends for his past and defeat both human and paranormal evils in Los Angeles, California. Blending neo-noir, horror, drama, and crime-thriller elements, *Angel* utilizes a serialized format coupled with an overarching dynamic between the fight between good and evil— in this case, the Powers That Be (the fictional universe’s deities) and the demonic law firm Wolfram & Hart, as the apocalypse looms. Angel is joined by a variety of both human and supernatural colleagues— some originating on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*— throughout his journey for redemption. Many storylines revolve around Angel’s internal conflict between his violent past as Angelus (the name assigned to his soulless self for clarity) and his ensouled existence in the present day. The series was initially somewhat unsuccessful as it lacked *Buffy*’s girl-power enthusiasm and carried a much darker tone, but has maintained a passionate fan base, as well as numerous comic and novel adaptations within the “Buffyverse Extended Universe,” nearly 20 years after its conclusion.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (which served as the source material for the spin-off series *Angel*) was created by Joss Whedon as a subversion of many classic and often-misogynistic horror tropes. While my research here focuses on the television series, it is important to mention that this story at large is based on a 1992 movie of the same name, of which Joss Whedon served as the lead writer; the film is not seen as “canon” (or relevantly accurate) to the subsequent *Buffy* series or *Angel* spin-off, but it did set the tone for *Buffy*’s genre-bending comedy and television horror prestige. The titular character, Buffy (portrayed by Sarah Michelle Gellar), is a blonde and traditionally feminine heroine who is destined to be a warrior, or Slayer, and protect the world from vampires and supernatural threats. The emphasis on female empowerment— Slayers,

within the Buffyverse, are always female— is consistent throughout the series, as very few women face a fate of needless death— their lives and deaths are celebrated within narratives of heroism, and rarely occur solely for the benefit of a male character or an overarching plot.

Though it features a variety of dramatic and dark plots, particularly towards the end of its seven-season run, the show maintains an aura of optimism that is markedly absent from its subsequent spin-off. The show appealed to a wide array of audiences, not just teen girls who resonated with Buffy's likeness but with an ambiguous category of viewers who appreciated the lead heroine's commitment to feminine empowerment, perseverance, and friendship.

Angel, however, received less praise by comparison; as stated previously, it adopted a neo-noir aesthetic in not only its episodic structure (the first season relies on a crime drama-esque weekly format and abandons it shortly after) but also via darker lighting and more harsh cinematic choices. Even as the show adopts a more serialized pacing, the moral ambiguity and overall fatalist outlook of the series— conveyed through more “adult” plotlines, fewer healthy romantic and platonic relationships, and frequent monologues about the inevitability of characters' fate at the hands of unwavering prophecies— remain. The show lacks a real sense of tonal levity in even its most joyful moments; there are rare comedic episodes sprinkled through the show's five-season run, like “Spin the Bottle” (season 4, episode 6) in which the characters revert to their teenage selves due to a mind-altering potion, and “Smile Time” (season 5, episode 14) in which Angel is turned into a Sesame Street-style puppet— but these episodes serve solely as a bait-and-switch, as the episodes that follow immediately after usher in some of the most emotionally-devastating plots of the series at large (“Cordelia's” intimacy with Connor and Fred's invasion by Illyria). For these reasons, and the show's male-centric cast and

accompanying storylines, it is perhaps no wonder why *Angel* failed to captivate its audiences to the passionate degree of *Buffy*, its more vibrant and critically-acclaimed predecessor.

Angel is not only dominated by male leads throughout its five seasons, but it also features a plethora of deaths by its female supporting characters. The pilot features a young, blonde, nondescript woman dying at the hand of a male vampire, and this theme continues throughout the series. Of the ten main characters, only three are female—two, Cordelia Chase and Winifred “Fred” Burkle, are killed during the aforementioned pregnancy plotlines, and the third, Harmony, is a blonde vampire used primarily for comedic relief in the final season. Of the 23 recurring/guest characters, ten are female; however, the death rate is still significant. Two—Darla and Drusilla—are vampires, and Darla commits suicide during the birth of her son, Connor. Two more—Kate Lockley and Virginia Bryce—serve as love interests for the main male cast, and fade into obscurity after their respective plotlines conclude (notably, Kate Lockley also has a suicide attempt during season 2, which is intercut with scenes of Darla and Angel’s coupling that led to Connor’s conception). As well, two—Lilah Morgan and Eve—are female lawyer stereotypes, and, as humans, die in dismissive plotlines in their respective seasons. Two more—Trish Burkle and Justine Cooper—do not die on screen, but their appearances are minimal; Burkle is Fred’s mother and a Southern belle stereotype, and Cooper is a vigilante whose arc revolves primarily around her developing an attraction to one of the male leads. The final two are outliers: Faith Lehane, another Slayer who was introduced on *Buffy*, makes occasional appearances on the series that are largely exempt from the show’s sexist treatment of women, and her plotline transfers back to *Buffy* at the show’s conclusion. Jasmine, the only woman of color on this list, is the higher power created from sexual relations between Connor and Cordelia; she is presented at first to be a benevolent deity, but is later revealed as a monster,

who consumes human souls to further her agenda of world peace. She is killed at the conclusion of season 4, and though she is largely considered the main villain of that season, she is mentioned incredibly sparingly in the final season, as the show returns to its roots and stages Wolfram & Hart, the demonic law firm that first appeared in the show's pilot episode, as the final— and heavily masculine-coded— foe.

The dismissive and often-violent treatment of women in *Angel* serves as a stark contrast to portrayals of women and femininity in *Buffy*, a show often heralded for its feminist content— though even this label may be a bit premature, when considering the issues of race- and sexuality-based discrimination and tokenization prevalent within the original series as well. My analysis of both series stems largely from ideas presented by Lorna Jowett in the 2005 text *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan*, who argues that “*Buffy* presents neither a ‘subversive’ nor a ‘conservative’ view of gender but, rather, a contradictory mixture of both”; the show is not feminist solely because it features female heroines, nor is its spin-off *Angel* inherently anti-feminist because it centers on male characters instead (Jowett 2005, 1). And, in considering the character makeup and plot arcs of both shows, we must also reflect on the creators’ perspectives when crafting the series themselves; *Buffy* was created primarily by Joss Whedon, and *Angel*, too, was created by Whedon as well as David Greenwalt, a writer and producer from the first three seasons of *Buffy*. However, Joss Whedon and his production company *Mutant Enemy* served as the de-facto “face” of the brains behind *Buffy* and *Angel* for both of their on-screen runs, and his impact on both series in terms of their possible social and cultural impacts deserves further consideration.

“You’re talking to someone who was raised to be a radical feminist,” showrunner Whedon said in a 2003 interview; he frequently emphasized his background in gender studies as

an important component of his writing and directing prowess, and when Buffy herself grew to popularity as a feminist icon, Whedon reaped the benefits throughout the early 21st century.⁶ Beginning in 2017, however, accusations regarding his misleading messages and on-set abuses began to gain traction; his ex-wife declared him a “hypocrite preaching feminist ideals” who frequently cheated on her with actors in his productions, and rumors began to fly about his treatment of a variety of actors, particularly people of color and women, that contradicted his spotless feminist ally image. These allegations, namely from Ray Fisher and Gal Gadot, characterized Whedon as abusive, unprofessional, and threatening, weaponizing his status as a prominent director to manipulate actors into complicity. However, perhaps the most damning set of allegations came from *Buffy* and *Angel* star Charisma Carpenter, who played high-school mean-girl turned steadfast demon-fighter Cordelia Chase in both shows. In a February 2021 Twitter thread as part of an #IStandWithRayFisher campaign, she wrote about Whedon’s frequent abuses of power on the set of *Buffy* and *Angel*, namely during her pregnancy with her son, who she gave birth to in March of 2003. He frequently body-shamed her, questioned her desire to “keep it” (and suggested she get an abortion), and mocked her Catholic faith; a season later, once she had given birth, he fired her from the show— which ended shortly thereafter, with fans criticizing the abrupt departure of Carpenter’s beloved character.

Whedon, like many other male media moguls accused of bad behavior during the rise of the #MeToo movement, denied these allegations vehemently, suggesting that his critics “don’t give a fuck about feminism” and merely seek to destabilize his impact within the film and television industry, because destroying his credibility by platforming these allegations of abuse

⁶ Stated in a 2003 interview with IGN FilmForce (<https://www.ign.com/articles/2003/06/23/an-interview-with-joss-whedon>).

would also jeopardize his continued social and financial successes.⁷ But what is the legacy of a man who claims to be a champion of feminism while systematically denigrating the women within his productions? What becomes of his reputation when it is tainted by the stories of his anti-woman abuses and his use of feminism as a shield against criticism? Here, Whedon may perhaps find his answer within the story of another famous (or perhaps infamous) director of female-centric horror— Roman Polanski, who cemented his film prowess in 1968 with *Rosemary's Baby*. Following the tragic 1969 murder of his then-pregnant wife Sharon Tate (who Polanski had hoped to cast in the titular role a year prior), Polanski's name appeared in the news for far-less-savory reasons; in 1977, he was arrested and charged with drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl when he was 43. Though he pled not guilty, and received immense support from fellow Hollywood executives, he later agreed to a plea bargain to reduce the charges on his record; however, shortly before sentencing, rumors swirled that the judge of the case planned to sentence him to 50 years for his crimes, and Polanski fled the country to France, where he had citizenship. Despite the allegations against him— which grew as more and more actresses came forward to discuss Polanski's abuses of them when they were younger— Polanski has continued directing films while living in Europe, to varying degrees of success. Both Polanski and Whedon have kept a tight grip on the remains of their careers, though their legacies are, deservedly, forever tainted by their abuses and manipulations of women, particularly actresses, throughout their history.

Returning to a discussion of *Buffy*'s on-screen depictions of gender and feminism, we must critically examine the mythos of the “Buffyverse” and what elements persist within the plotlines of *Angel*. While *Buffy* is considered a show of “generic hybridity”— blending elements

⁷ Stated in a 2022 interview with Vulture (<https://www.vulture.com/article/joss-whedon-allegations.html>).

of soap opera, horror, comedy, action, and teen drama, its spin-off is largely (and perhaps incorrectly) categorized within the more rigid parameters of film noir (Hills and Williams 2005, 203). In fact, *Angel* presented a relatively-new genre for prime-time audiences in its time: television horror. While most studies of the horror genre deem it to be most prominent in film and movies, the genre itself has an immense “transmedia presence,” maintaining an ability to contradict the notions of TV as a “glance” medium while film serves as a “gaze” medium, terms that suggest a shortened sense of viewer *engagement* and minimize the level of affective intensity possible in small-screen media (Hills 2005, 111-112). Including *Buffy* (and, by extension, *Angel*) in his analysis, Matt Hills argues against Stephen King’s belief that television denies “textual agency” to horror creators, suggesting that the genre of “television horror” is perhaps perfectly suited to confront Gothic villains (Hills cites the fleeting appearance of Dracula in the fifth season of *Buffy*, as well as the black-and-white *Frankenstein*-themed episode of *The X-Files*) alongside a more modern cast of characters. While it’s indisputable that television programming must often “show less” to conform to industry censors and instead make use of the intertextual codes of horror and invoke on-screen subtleties, these possible problems have given rise to a uniquely hybridized genre of horror that fits perfectly within the small screen setting of TV.

3 METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The primary focus of this thesis lies with the critical analysis of the television series *Angel*, and its many pregnancy storylines throughout its five-season run— however, the goal is not merely to craft a comparative analysis of existing media. Instead, the discussion and contextualization of the selected sources in this thesis allows for a deeper interdisciplinary study of the intersections between media, contemporary feminism, and historical precedent, by combining frameworks from cultural theorist Stuart Hall— who pioneered the terminology of “encoding” and “decoding” in television broadcast analysis in the mid 1970s— and Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese— who, in 2014, penned *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective* to elaborate on the concept of symbolic environments in media production. Drawing upon varying approaches to media analysis presented by the aforementioned theorists, and combining their techniques with genre-specific analytical frameworks from horror and supernatural scholars, this thesis explores the possible impacts of the many pregnancy storylines in *Angel*, why they are so prevalent in contemporary media at large, and what this content may suggest about the recreation of social and political trends via the medium of popular culture— as reflected through the emphasis on the discourses of encoding and decoding throughout the forthcoming season-by-season analysis.

Stuart Hall (1932-2014) was a Jamaican-born British cultural theorist who wrote extensively on topics of political activism, Marxist sociology, and communication studies; he is considered to be one of the most influential scholars of British Cultural Studies, and also founded the *New Left Review*, a radical publication of political and social trends that began in 1960. His emphasis on cultural studies is perhaps most visible when discussing his 1973 text, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” which offered a semiotic approach to media

production and consumption, and focused not only on one of the aforementioned factors but on the “reciprocity” of ideas between producers and the audience (Hall 1973, 6). In a somewhat-paradoxical structure, as termed by Hall himself, “the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a communicative event”; media carries a message at its core, and this message cannot—or *should not*—be separated from its creation (Hall 1973, 2). Put simply, the “object” of television is “the production of a message”; despite critics who were eager to dismiss television as a powerful form of social communication and engagement, the media itself has immense power to transmit and receive valuable messages for its viewers, creators, and even critics (Hall 1973, 1). Contemporary media, and television media in the case of Hall’s analysis, does not exist within an isolated bubble, or through a limited scope—it is an open system of ideas, with both denotative (literal, factual, precise) and connotative (figurative, emotional, abstract) levels that require comprehension and analysis.

Hall posits that media is first constructed through a synthesis of knowledge and possible meanings before being distributed to audiences and repeating the open-system effect ad nauseam. Though Hall’s theoretical text uses the genre of Westerns as its primary example, in order to demonstrate its effectiveness in practice, the ideas ring true when transferred into the genres of horror and supernatural television. For the purposes of this thesis, I seek to better understand the varying frameworks of knowledge that the showrunners, in particular Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt, chose to incorporate into the production and plotlines of *Angel*, while also discussing the *structures* of production present in supernatural television, as well as the overarching genres of horror and paranormal media, which engage largely with topics of pregnancy, maternal autonomy, and possessed wombs, in order to determine what messages may be “encoded,” “decoded,” and uniquely understood through this medium.

Though not mentioned by name, Stuart Hall’s methodological frameworks and overall influence upon the field of media content analysis can be felt in 21st-century writings on the subject; in particular, I have chosen the approaches presented by Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese, in the 2014 text *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective*, to serve as a supplementary source for my media analysis. Shoemaker and Reese present a model known as the Hierarchy of Influences, which posits that there are five levels of society that may have a varying impact on media production and consumption; this framework, which determines not only *who* the creators of media are, but to whom they speak, and for what purpose, is extrapolated largely from a 1948 statement on media content analysis from American political scientist Howard Lasswell (Shoemaker & Reese 1996, 12):

“Who (says) what
 (through) which channel
 (to) whom
 (with) what effect”

In particular, Lasswell, Shoemaker, and Reese emphasize the importance of subjectivity within the landscape of media analysis, in order to draw conclusions around how such concepts are encoded, and subsequently decoded, by viewers— a topic that is at the forefront of texts on *Rosemary’s Baby* (Valerius), the visual relationship between a person and their growing pregnant body in horror films (Harrington), and the increasingly-popular discussions on writer-actor relationships on the set of *Angel*.

The “who (says)” of horror movies is largely male, in terms of directorship, production, and conception of horror plots, as well as in the portrayals of main characters, whether as heroes or hulking villains. Women are largely seen as objects within these films, and are subjected to

high levels of often-sexual violence while being trapped within stereotyped roles and clichés— like the aforementioned “final girl,” “virgin,” or “slut”— and serving as the audience’s in-screen proxy; she experiences first-hand the pain and fear that we, the viewers, enjoy more comfortably from afar (Clover 2015, x-xi). The “what channel,” or venue of access, for horror media is largely that of movies that the viewers seek out voluntarily, save for reruns on late night television stations; horror is a genre that is rarely consumed accidentally. This is largely in part to mid-20th-century debates over censorship and media ratings, and, ironically in the same year as the theatrical release of *Rosemary’s Baby*, the Motion Picture Association of America instituted the “Industry Code of Self Regulation” in 1968, as a measurable metric of a film’s appropriateness— and to avoid post-production censorship (Waller in *The Horror Reader* 2000, 259). This Industry Code, as well, is reminiscent of the (inherently limiting) quantitative foundation of media studies, in its measurements of the quantity of curse words, sexual scenes, and visible weapons. The newly-established “R” rating, and uncertainties about how to categorize films with varying degrees of grotesque, violent, and sexual content, largely increased the variety of plots within horror movies, as directors sought new ways to push envelopes and prey off audience’s fears while staying relevant to current events and trends (like the mention of the Pope’s visit to New York alongside Satan’s assault on Rosemary in the opening third of the film). Television, meanwhile, does not have the same strict rating and categorizations of the film medium, and though *Angel* was awarded a TV-14 rating, this is likely due to the themes of violence throughout the series, rather than a specific consideration for the pregnancy storylines in their respective seasons. The “to whom” of horror, too, is largely male, as men are typically more willing to view violent media than women, particularly since women are overwhelmingly victimized within the genre. In terms of supernatural/paranormal media content, this statistic

shifts significantly, and when discussing *Angel*, the female-centric popularity of its predecessor *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* cannot be understated— though both shows struggle to maintain the mantle of feminist ideology particularly in issues of sexuality and reproduction.

The final clause of Lesswell's statement, "(with) what effect," re-emphasizes the qualitative side of media content analysis; mass media both reflects current public opinions and impacts the creation of new ideas, and as factors within the horror genre shift, the perceptions of such factors do as well. Here, media content analysis perhaps performs at its best, by engaging with the "cultural temperature" of society and offering an ever-evolving lens through which to study socio-cultural relationships and the effects of media within contemporary life (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, 30). This returns us to discussions of "the symbolic environment" of Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy model, and reaffirms Stuart Hall's ideas about how the media's *message* may not only present new ideas about society, but also construct a metaphorical society of its own, guided by the principles set forth in fiction (Shoemaker & Reese 1996, 31-32). This space is not only dictated by the writers and producers— though in the example of *Angel*, both Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt wield a heavy and often masculinist hand— but in the reception of the media itself, by critics and casual fans, and the show's lasting impact on the supernatural stories we choose to share, scorn, or celebrate.

4 *ANGEL*, SEASON 3

The first overarching example of the pregnancy trope in *Angel*, which takes place across the show's second and third seasons and centers on Darla, Angel, and their semi-human son Connor, easily demonstrates the aforementioned *shibboleth of death* concept from start to finish. Even omitting the paranormal nature of the show itself, this storyline quickly reduces the development and motivations of the pregnant female character to revolve solely around her pregnancy, rather than any of her complex traits prior to this point in the series. As well, her surprising decision to commit suicide at the climax of this storyline, which allows for the fetus to be born, is deemed as a self-sacrificing act— however, this reading fails to address the reductive and harmful implication that her life, and subsequent death, exist only to further the narratives of the men around her, in particular Angel (her on-again, off-again lover and father of her child) and Connor, her newborn son. This is not only a character death in the literal sense, as she dies in order to birth her son, but in a metaphorical sense as well, and it is this metaphorical destruction of her character that I deem the most important. Her monstrous nature, and accompanying influence as a secondary villain throughout this spin-off series (and the original material of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), is largely washed away in the shadow of her pregnancy arc, and she then occupies the narrow confines of the helpless female victim trope until committing suicide, reinforcing that she is both defined and damned— and ultimately destroyed— by both the mystical and all-too-realistic circumstances of this unexpected pregnancy.

4.1 SOURCE SUMMARY

The third season of *Angel* (which aired from September 24, 2001, to May 20, 2002) revolves primarily around the violent past, and the resulting complicated present-day relationship, between the show's ensouled vampire protagonist, Angel, and the soulless Darla,

his on-again off-again vampiric lover. Darla was first sired (turned into a vampire) in the early 17th century in colonial America, and she sired Angelus in Ireland roughly 100 years later. The pair were lovers and partners for over a century, though their bond was broken when Angelus was cursed with a soul by a Romani tribe after brutalizing one of their sacred daughters shortly before the turn of the 20th century. Angel and Darla's paths didn't cross again until the first season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, when Angel staked Darla in order to protect Buffy, the Slayer and his then-romantic interest. However, Darla was resurrected as a human in the first season of *Angel* by Wolfram & Hart as a ploy to turn Angel back towards the dark side. Angel's soul-curse contains a loophole that forces his soul to be removed if he experiences a moment of "perfect happiness," and the firm interpreted this as the consummation of a sexual act; they hoped that reuniting Angel and Darla would restore Angelus to his former evil glory and allow him to be used to their advantage in the pending apocalypse. In *Angel*'s second season, Darla grows ill (as a result of the syphilis she contracted shortly before her first death in 1609), and though she hopes Angel will re-sire her, he refuses, and she seeks support from another vampire, the insane Drusilla (one of Angelus's creations) in order to be returned to her vampiric nature. Angel's mental status descends into anger and uncertainty as a result of Darla's presence in his life, and the pair engage in sexual intercourse halfway through the second season of the series. Angel's soul remains intact, and Darla flees the city, presumably for good.

Darla returns to the series in season 3, episode 7 ("Offspring"), heavily and unexpectedly pregnant with Angel's child; she seeks a termination, and Angel initially denies his forthcoming fatherhood before accepting the situation and expressing concern not only for the fetus's health, but for its possible nature as a child of vampiric demons. After a few tests, both mystical and medical in nature, it is revealed that the fetus possesses not only a human heartbeat but a soul as

well. Soon, Darla begins experiencing symptoms of early labor and demands for the fetus to be removed, but then experiences a moral dilemma—the fetus’s soul residing inside her influences her to be less violent and more compassionate, and she fears that once the child is born, she “won’t be able to love it... won’t even be able to *remember* that I [she] loved it” (season 3, episode 9, “Lullaby”) As her labor intensifies, she performs her first act of motherhood; she stakes herself, turning to dust as the infant boy, now named Connor, enters the world.

With Darla dead (though very little time is dedicated to mourning her loss), a problem that undercut the first half of the show’s third season now increases in importance and urgency; Daniel Holtz, a vampire hunter from the 18th century arrives in Los Angeles in order to avenge his family, who were brutally murdered by Darla and Angelus in 1764. Holtz was preserved through a mystical form of suspended animation by Sahjhan, a time-traveling demon who sought revenge not against Angel himself, but against Connor, who was prophesied to murder Sahjhan in the distant future. As well, local demonic contingents seek to eliminate the human-born Connor, as he is a mystical anomaly that may play a crucial role in the apocalypse, and Holtz is surprised by the news that Angel has a son, reflecting on his long-dead children once murdered by the vampire. Steadfast in his mission to kill Angel, he forms an army by recruiting other humans whose lives were upended by vampires, swearing that, if Angel’s friends get in the way, then they too must be eliminated; this decision startles Justine, Holtz’s second-in-command, who begins to lose faith in the mission. Wesley, the primary researcher for Angel Investigations, discovers a prophecy that alludes to Connor’s recent birth, and in translating it he discovers an alarming phrase: “the father will kill the son”; as more portents (like an earthquake) come true, he begins to fear for the child’s safety and seeks out Holtz, hoping to reach an agreement (season 3, episode 14, “Couplet”). Holtz grants him one day to try and save Connor before he continues

on his mission to kill Angel, and with his mind made up, Wesley plots to kidnap Connor and flee the city. He's caught by Justine, who slits his throat and takes Connor away, promising to raise the child alongside Holtz. As Wesley bleeds out (though he manages to survive), a confrontation erupts— the demon Sahjhan is furious that Holtz is willing to let the child live, while a desperate Angel begs Holtz to take Connor and leave, in hopes of keeping his son alive. Sahjhan opens a portal to Quor'Toth, a hell dimension, and threatens to doom the entire world if the child is kept alive; at the last moment, Holtz, with Connor in his arms, leaps into the portal, sealing the rift and leaving Los Angeles behind.

Angel is overcome with grief at the loss of his child, and angry at Wesley's betrayal; the latter man manages to survive the injury to his throat, but Angel nearly kills him in the hospital as he recovers from his injuries. Angel conspires with his long-standing enemy, the evil law firm Wolfram & Hart to locate his son, in hopes of saving him from the hell dimension he's trapped in with Holtz. However, the dark magicks create instability between the realities, and they learn of a vicious warrior, called The Destroyer, who is rumored to be hunting down Angel by any means necessary. In a flash of light, a portal opens and the warrior appears: it's Connor— armed, dangerous, and now a teenager. Raised by a now-elderly Holtz (who also returned to Earth via the portal) in Quor'Toth to believe that all demons are evil, Connor is dedicated to completing his surrogate father's quest by killing Angel, who is alarmed by his son's attitude. Holtz, however, can feel his own death approaching, and pens a letter to Connor telling him that sometimes letting go is necessary, and to seek his destiny with Angel; Connor finds Holtz dead, with two wounds in his neck (created by Justine and an icepick), and swears vengeance against Angel, falsely believing Angel to be the murderer— just as Holtz intended.

Connor, reeling from the death of his surrogate father, secretly plans for revenge while pretending to bond with Angel, even living in the same hotel space and patrolling Los Angeles together. The vampire is overjoyed at their newfound closeness and turns his attention to romance, as his crush on his coworker Cordelia has blossomed; the pair make plans to meet on a beach at midnight to discuss their future together. As Cordelia drives to their meeting spot, she is waylaid by an emissary of the Powers That Be, who request her presence and cooperation as a higher being; she disappears into a bright light, and Angel continues to wait for her. However, Connor begins to carry out his scheme, arriving at the beach and engaging Angel in hand-to-hand combat before tasing him and boarding a boat captained by Justine. He locks Angel in a metal coffin and drops it to the bottom of the ocean, sentencing his father to a grisly fate—time and starvation, though painful, will not kill a vampire.

4.2 ANALYSIS

The pregnancy storyline that dominates the third season of *Angel*—the vampiric Darla’s pregnancy and eventual birth of Connor, a human with enhanced strength—engages with some pre-existing assumptions about maternity and bodily autonomy, in particular the idea of prioritizing the fetus over the life of the mother (which speaks to the concept of “fetal subjectivity” presented in Harrington’s scholarship), while also prompting the inclusion of new topics of discussion within the supernatural medium. These new topics—in particular the inversion of Darla’s historicity as a villainous character in favor of her newfound semi-maternal instincts and eventual death in order to facilitate her child’s life—inspire us to reconsider the ways women, particularly these “monstrous” women (to borrow from Barbara Creed) are subjugated even in storylines that position them at the center. To begin, we must first discuss the events that surround the conception of Connor himself, and expand on the details presented

above in the source summary, particularly the sexual relations that take place between the ensouled vampire Angel and his soulless vampiric sire Darla in the show's second season (season 2, episode 15, "Reprise"). Neither character is emotionally stable when the sex occurs—Darla, who has just recently become a vampire for the second time, is uncertain of what her future holds, and Angel, who has pushed away his friends and support system while experiencing what would likely be described as a severe depressive episode, contemplates losing his soul in order to be freed from the guilt and emotional unrest it provides him.

At this point in the combined history of *Buffy* and *Angel*, Angel himself has lost his soul merely once since being cursed with it in 1898; after having sex with Buffy in season 2 of her own series, he awakens from a blissful post-coital sleep to the sensation of his soul being removed from his body (as a result of the aforementioned "perfect happiness" clause). Though not stated outright, Angel's motivations for having sex with Darla (a woman he spent over 100 years with during the peak of his violent vampiric history) is likely a desire to lose his soul; Darla, who is soulless herself, is delighted by the idea of him returning to his more carefree nature, and when she learns the curse wasn't lifted from their sexual encounter, she is disgusted by him and disappointed by his moral superiority. She feels betrayed by their encounter, and when she goes to leave, Angel threatens her: "the next time I see you, I will have to kill you" (*Angel* season 2, episode 16, "Epiphany"). Darla is not seen again within the show's second season, and the tryst between her and Angel is kept largely a secret from the rest of the characters. When we see Darla on screen again—other than a few flashback sequences—in the show's third-season debut episode, she is changed both physically and mentally; her reveal is somewhat of a "gotcha moment," as we see her from behind at first, seeking information about a mystical shaman from a man in a Nicaraguan bar. After brutally murdering the informant, by

biting him and drinking his blood, she turns around to reveal to the audience that she is unexpectedly and quite visibly pregnant. This dramatic debut of her now-pregnant form is intended to be jarring, as we were unaware of her pregnancy (and even the events of her sexual encounter with Angel were largely forgotten after they occurred in season 2, episode 16, “Epiphany”), and yet it simultaneously echoes the reveal of Darla’s vampirism back in the series premiere of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (season 1, episode 1, “Welcome to the Hellmouth”), in which Darla’s innocent and girlish appearance served to disguise her demonic nature and aid in the act of luring helpless victims to their doom. In this, her pregnancy is seen as a symbolic successor to this vampiric visage; it is yet another example of a female character’s deception of their male counterparts, whether through violent means (once again casting her as a temptress in some way) or unexpected pregnancy, in the case of Darla’s new predicament.

In the season’s second episode, she meets with the aforementioned shaman in Honduras to discuss her pregnancy, stating “I tried everything and I can’t get rid of it... What is this thing growing inside me? And how is it possible?” He performs a blood magic ritual, but the verdict disappoints her; as he says, “I cannot help you. No man can. This is not meant to be known,” and Darla vows to seek out Angel. She is adamant about her decision to have an abortion, expressing frustration and disgust with the possibility of caring for his child. It is worth noting that very few television shows throughout this era (and including present day) have depicted stories of characters desiring and obtaining abortion procedures— and the few that *do* rarely present these arcs in a positive or inclusive light.⁸ The first instance of a character undergoing an abortion occurred in 1972 on *Maude*, in which the titular 47-year-old character gets an abortion with the

⁸ For a history of reproductive health and abortion-related storylines in American television, I highly recommend the undated entry “A Timeline of Abortion Stories in U.S. Popular Media” from the *Penny Lane* blog. <https://pennylaneismyrealname.com/a-timeline-of-abortion-stories-in-us-popular-media/>

tearful support of her husband. Over 50 years later, few characters have fared in a similar vein, as abortion storylines are met with heavy controversy and criticism by news outlets and viewers alike. Even extending past the few-and-far-between portrayals of characters obtaining abortions, there is perhaps a more prevalent issue within media—the idea that “good girls” don’t want abortions, because it conflicts with their unflappable morals.⁹ Of course, our central pregnant character in this third season storyline of *Angel*, Darla, would not be considered a “good girl” in any sense of the word, given her history of violence and mayhem; and yet, she still gives up on her quest to obtain an abortion and later confesses to her love for the child. Here, the concept of fetal personhood once again reigns supreme; regardless of Darla’s origins as a villainous character, the purity of the fetus within her is championed above all, including her own desires. On the subject of encoding and decoding discourses, this suggests that, much as with my own assertions about the usage of pregnancy as a *shibboleth of death* within these storylines, the specific and varying details of these characters’ pregnancies serve solely as vehicles to further arcs of other characters— or, in this case, to further anti-abortion rhetoric in the world at large. If even a monstrous character cannot obtain an abortion, then that positions abortion as something so evil, so heinous, that not even our foes deserve access.

Darla finally returns to Los Angeles to confront Angel about his role in her newly-pregnant state, demanding “What did you do to me?” Immediately, Angel’s second-in-command Cordelia Chase (a human who previously feared Darla’s violent nature) expresses concern for Darla’s health, and she along with Fred (another female member of the Angel Investigations team) are quick to offer hesitant support for Darla; Cordelia, in questioning Angel’s hand in Darla’s pregnancy, suggests that he “used her” and states “you just went male” in regards to his

⁹ This concept is explored further, with a plethora of examples, on the TVTropes page “Good Girls Avoid Abortion.” <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GoodGirlsAvoidAbortion>

actions. Though the nature of the pregnancy is still uncertain, given vampiric infertility, a clear gender divide has formed. Angel, still in shock over Darla's re-appearance and pregnant condition, questions whether or not she is experiencing "hysteria"—it's played as a comedic moment, but the language is evocative of a history of medical neglect and dismissal that women, particularly during pregnancy, have experienced at the hands of men (whether they are medical professionals and fathers, in Angel's case). A diagnosis of hysteria, a word extrapolated from Hippocrates' 5th century writings about the wandering womb, established an uneasy connection between women's reproductive capabilities and their overreactive tendencies; this historic pathologizing of femininity condemns women for existing outside of society's prescribed gender norms and often bars them from equitable treatment in both the medical sphere and beyond.¹⁰ In Darla's case, it further emphasizes that she, as a violent vampire who reigned supreme for centuries, cannot be trusted in regards to her own body.

Seeking answers about the pregnancy— and fearing Darla's return to Los Angeles may be related to a looming prophecy of something "born out of darkness to bring darkness" that they began researching before Darla arrived— the Angel Investigations team, with Darla in tow, travel to visit a benevolent demonic acquaintance, Lorne, who has helped them with supernatural cases in the past. Interestingly, the positioning the fetus as a possible figure of "darkness" still does not destabilize the heavy-handed emphasis on fetal subjectivity— the unknown and uncertain fetus, still, remains privileged above Darla's own experiences and desires. As they discuss the prophecy, their dialogue and linguistic choices characterize Darla's fetus with the singular pronoun "it," eliminating any immediate gender biases and casting the fetus as in- or

¹⁰ Amin, Aisiri. "The Sexist Roots of Naming Hysteria: How is Language Used to Silence Women?" *Feminism in India*, July 25, 2022. <https://feminisminindia.com/2022/07/25/the-sexist-roots-of-naming-hysteria-how-is-language-used-to-silence-women/>

sub-human, but the conversation notably lacks Darla's own presence, as she (and the other female companions, Cordelia and Fred) are sequestered into a back room to rest. Cordelia commiserates with Darla about her situation, recounting a moment in her history (season 1, episode 12 "Expecting") in which she too was pregnant via demonic intervention, though her situation was resolved quickly and without incident once the demon in question was eliminated. It's a poignant and ultimately prophetic moment between the unlikely pair, considering that only one season later, Cordelia's dynamic character arc will end abruptly with another destructive pregnancy storyline, much like Darla in season three. Even as early as the show's first season, the writers are seemingly solidifying the implication that pregnancy, in a variety of contexts, is a sure-fire way to demonstrate violent and possessive levels of women's subjugation at the hands of male characters.

Darla quickly escapes, disarming Cordelia by pinning her to a wall and drinking her blood while Cordy experiences a "vision" from the Powers that Be; Darla's vampiric strength does not appear weakened in any way by her pregnancy, and Cordelia remarks that she was easily overpowered by Darla because she underestimated her: "She looked so helpless— like a mother. I forgot what she really was." This dialogue, which is quickly followed by agreement from the rest of the Angel Investigations team, demonstrates that, despite Darla's pregnant status, the team views her as a vampire first, and a pregnant woman second in a clear hierarchy of abilities, likely due to her soulless nature, as expanded on further in the following paragraph. As the team search for Darla, fearing that if she goes into labor the prophesied evil may arise, Cordelia remembers the contents of her vision and suggests that Darla is seeking out younger victims to feed from, because the child within her craves "purer blood": her child, unlike her, has not only a heartbeat but also a soul.

When Angel locates and confronts Darla within a children's arcade, she begs him to kill her, as she is unwilling to remain pregnant; Angel refuses, and the show's audio amplifies the sound of the fetus's heartbeat, reaffirming its living status despite existing within a vampire's body. Angel himself has a soul (as a result of the aforementioned Romani curse), but Darla does not, and she is horrified to learn that their child is, for all intents and purposes, a human, complete with a human soul despite its vampiric parents. Soul lore within the Buffyverse is complicated, but much of it can be summarized with the overly-simplistic statement of "soul equals good, soulless equals bad"; characters who lack souls (like demons and vampires at large) are considered not only largely unfeeling, but *incapable* of feeling emotions like true love, compassion, and remorse. Their ensouled counterparts— humans, of course, and Angel, the vampiric exception to the soulless rule— however, are seen as inherently good and moral characters, even when committing evil deeds. A clear division has formed; Darla is still largely categorized as evil, while Angel (and their unborn son) are believed to be capable of good; this is not merely reflective of their ensouled state but suggestive of a gendered separation as well, as Angel's protectiveness for the son mimics the idea of modern fathers hoping for male children above all else.

Before becoming pregnant, Darla abhorred the idea of ensouled vampires, and even resented Angel for becoming cursed with his own in the late 19th century; once pregnant, however, the presence of the fetus' soul appears to have an immense impact upon her decision-making abilities. When she begins having contractions in the following episode (season 3, episode 8 "Quickening"— this title refers to the stage in which a pregnant person can feel their fetus moving, typically beginning at the 20-week mark, and the turning point at which late 19th-century laws deemed abortions forbidden), she once again affirms her decision to want the fetus

removed at all costs, though attempts to cut it out of her body fail— somehow, the fetus is protected by some sort of magical barrier. A stolen ultrasound machine reveals that the fetus is not only human, but male as well. Though the symbolism up to this point may seem unclear, this moment is strongly reflective of the Virgin Mary story, a young woman, pregnant by divine means, will give birth to a boy who will invariably change the world. I am wary to position Darla as a Mary-like figure, because there is little canonical material to support these claims, but the heavy-handed prophesizing about her fetus— a storytelling device used frequently within *Angel* to deem some characters more important than others— does perhaps inscribe Connor as an eventual influential figure. However, it's also worth acknowledging that it is not the first, or the last, prophecy to be heavily reliant on ambiguous interpretations.

The next episode (season 3, episode 9, “Lullaby”), Darla’s last true appearance in the series, contains dialogue that reaffirms the religious implications of Darla’s pregnancy, and continues to emphasize the importance of souls within the Buffyverse at large. Alone on a rooftop, lit only by the moon, Darla confesses to Angel that, rather than being furious by her pregnancy as previously stated, she is saddened by it, and perhaps even more devastated to *lose* it by giving birth:

Darla: It wants to come out. I can feel it. It’s ready. It’s just— I can’t let it, because... I love it completely. I don’t think I’ve ever loved anything as much as this life that’s inside of me.

Angel: Well, you’ve never *loved* anything, Darla.

...

Darla: What do I have to offer a child, a *human* child, besides ugly death? ... You know it’s true.

Angel: No. What I do know is that you love this baby, our baby. You’ve bonded with it. You’ve spent nine months carrying it, nourishing it...

Darla: No. No, I haven't been nourishing it. I haven't given this baby a thing. I'm dead. It's been nourishing me. These feelings that I'm having, they aren't mine. They're coming from it... I don't have a soul. It does. And right now that soul is inside of me, but soon, it won't be, and then... I won't be able to love it. I won't even be able to remember that I loved it. I want to remember...

As her contractions increase in frequency, she begs Angel to protect the child, not only from the world at large but from herself, once it is born; despite now knowing the biological sex of the child, Darla is one of a few characters who continues to refer to the child as "it," where Angel (the father) refers to it as "his son" or "the baby." However, for the first time, as she expresses her concern for its health (since her physical body is dead, the Angel Investigations team fear she may not be able to give birth vaginally), she calls it her "darling boy"—an affectionate phrase she used solely for Angel in previous episodes. Fielding incoming attacks from all sides (as local demons fight to capture and/or kill the fetus), they escape into the alleyway, which is nearly flooded with rain, and Darla remarks that their child will soon die in the alley, reminding Angel that he too died in an alleyway, when she turned him into a vampire in 1753. The pair commiserate once again about their long history of inflicting violence and pain, and Darla, overcome with emotions as she lays in Angel's arms, tells him that their child is "the one good thing they ever did together," saying "You make sure to tell him that" before grabbing a broken piece of wood from the ground and burying it in her chest, reducing herself to dust. All that remains in her wake is a naked baby boy, crying and reaching out for his father.

In her first— and last— real act of motherhood, Darla sacrifices herself in order to save the life of her son. It appears to be a moment of true selflessness, and a rather unexpected one for a character who was previously defined by their urge for independence and self-preservation.

This decision seems to suggest that, in order to fulfill the role of a *good* mother to her child, Darla must be willing to die for him; her language of “the one good thing they ever did together” reinforces her privileging of Connor as the fetal subject and further subjugating herself, this time through death, in order to establish his personhood at the expense of her own. Again, this strict division of good versus evil is reminiscent of the conflict of soullessness that ultimately ended the relationship between Angel and Darla. For Darla, who spent all nine months of her pregnancy resenting the fetus within her, her suicide feels somewhat hollow and performative; people can, of course, shift their perspectives on pregnancy once involved with it themselves, but the symbolism of Darla’s anguish culminating in her committing suicide to save the child is far more concerning than it is celebratory, as it exists merely to amplify the development of male characters, notably Angel and Connor himself, in the wake of her tragic exit. Jude Doyle (2019) perhaps says it best, in their study of *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers*— “pregnancy’s primal matriarchal power is suppressed and demonized, and childbirth becomes merely the process men use to create more men” (128). Angel dives into his role of fatherhood, and the tragedy— both of Darla’s suicide and the events that preceded it, robbing her of centuries of bodily autonomy— that allowed his son to emerge is largely forgotten in the wake of an onslaught of male-dominated plots to follow.

With Darla’s death in “Lullaby” (season 3, episode 9), the pregnancy arc of the show’s third season comes to a close, but the themes within this plotline continue to have an immense impact on the remainder of the season and series at large. Darla’s characterization up until her pregnancy was largely coded in the ideas of “monstrous” women that we see in research from Barbara Creed and Erin Harrington; she is a powerful vampire who uses her sexuality (stemming from her long-past human experiences as a prostitute) as a weapon just as much as she uses her

fangs; when we first meet her (in the pilot episode of *Buffy*, which aired in 1997) she is even dressed in a Catholic school-girl uniform to play up the inherent contradictions of her innocence and impurity. She turns Angel into a vampire, serving as a “mothering” figure in the metaphorical sense of the siring practice while also considering him her sexual and romantic partner; by the time they reunite in season 2 of *Angel*, Darla has died, been resurrected as human, and turned into a vampire once again at the hands of Drusilla, an insane vampire progeny of Angel— through this she is both Angel’s maker and his surrogate grandchild, and his lover once again. Their relationship can, and likely should, be described as incestuous, but the family trees and complex genealogy of vampires within the Buffyverse are largely dismissed in favor of more surface-level interpersonal relationships. Not even Darla’s recasting as a maternal figure during her pregnancy with Connor can spare her from her fate; she is invaded and subsequently consumed by the pregnancy, and its impact on her body drives her to commit suicide, an action that seems incongruous with her character development up to this point. This is the aforementioned *shibboleth of death* in action; regardless of Darla’s pre-existing characterization, the introduction of her pregnancy marks her from death from the very beginning of this arc. Through unsuccessful efforts to abort the fetus, Angel’s distrust of her as a possible mother for their child, and Holtz’s persistent attempts to track and destroy her for crimes she and Angel carried out centuries prior, Darla’s appearances throughout *Angel*’s third season first suggest her inevitable death and then reinforce it with her suicide at the conclusion of this arc.

The conception of Connor— the semi-human child born to vampiric parents Darla and Angel— reframes Darla, one of the franchise’s seminal villains, as an unconsenting victim not only of a dangerous and prophetic pregnancy, but of Angel’s misguided attempts to lose his soul through their coupling. And yet, when Darla returns to Los Angeles to confront Angel with the

news of her pregnancy, she is seen as the original sin (once again emphasizing the Christian religious implications of a divine pregnancy and foretold birth), inherently corrupting the fetus within her simply by existing. This reinforces the idea of fetal personhood as a superior force to Darla's own female subjectivity, which immediately and completely fades out of view when the child is determined to be human, and therefore possesses a soul. Here, the narrative changes to draw a strict separation between Darla and the child; the child is "good," and Darla is only capable of "acting good" because of the soul buried deep within her womb. For a show based on the ideals of redemption—Angel himself atones for centuries of evil by aiding the helpless of Los Angeles—Darla is seemingly denied the chance to make amends.

5 *ANGEL*, SEASON 4

The most widely-known and heavily-debated pregnancy storyline within *Angel*, the arc of Cordelia's pregnancy and possession at the hands of Jasmine during the fourth season continues to employ and expand upon the concept I have coined the *shibboleth of death*— pregnancy as a vehicle of female character destruction, both on a physical and psychological level— in the introduction to the preceding chapter. However, this arc in particular extends its reach past the events of the episodes themselves, and harkens back to the study of “encoding” and “decoding” television discourses in the Methods and Methodology section of this thesis. Stuart Hall's semiotic approach to both the production and consumption of television media can be observed here, through the ways in which elements of behind-the-scenes production (not only in the writer's room, but regarding discourses between showrunners and actors themselves) may begin to bleed over to the on-screen plots and into the ways the storylines were received, both at the time of airing and in reflections and analyses for years to come. In keeping with Hall's belief that the object and objective of television is to produce a particular message, we must ask ourselves what, with the inclusion of a second season-length pregnancy arc, the writers have intended as their message for us to receive? How have their intentions been overshadowed by the tangible receptions of the show's varied audiences, given recent revelations regarding the discourses surrounding the show's production?

Aside from the complex and at-times controversial nature of the behind-the-scenes events that contributed to the creation of the fourth season of *Angel*, the overlapping of pregnancy and spirit possession within this storyline encourages a close reading of Kristeva's and Creed's work on abjection of self in horror, particularly in relation to how pregnancy fundamentally alters and subverts a subject's sense of self, and often *not* for the better. When combined with a discussion

of mystical possession, of both body and mind, this prompts an even deeper study into consent, awareness, and intention— whether it is pregnancy that grants us the power to do so, or if it is what instead robs from us our ability to choose. With a pregnant subject, particularly one who gives birth to itself— as seen in the rise of Jasmine, detailed in the following sections— we must reconsider these ideas entirely; is it the acts of pregnancy and birth themselves that are monstrous, or what these events may represent about femininity, maternity, power, and the wielding of patriarchal control?

5.1 SOURCE SUMMARY

Heavily influenced by the events of the preceding season— including the birth of Connor, the budding romance between Angel and Cordelia, and the familial tensions between Angel and his now-teenage son— the fourth season of *Angel* (which aired from October 6, 2002, to May 7, 2003) picks up right where the third-season finale left off: Angel is locked in an underwater coffin, Cordelia has ascended to a higher plane of existence alongside the Powers That Be (the show's form of deities), and Connor harbors the secret of his father's whereabouts, as well as a healthy dose of hatred for the vampire. However, things quickly begin to unravel— Angel is rescued and nursed back to health by Wesley, the previously-estranged member of the Angel Investigations team who once kidnapped Connor to protect him, and Cordelia returns to Earth but lacks her memories. She is immediately distrustful of Angel and his team, but after a well-timed rescue from a demon with thanks to Connor, she develops a friendly relationship with him, citing that he's the only person she's met who has been honest with her— even though the truth, quite often, paints Connor (and Angel, to an extent) in a negative light. Soon after, Cordelia regains her memory through magical intervention, and confirms that she had been in love with Angel before she lost her memory; however, her feelings towards Angel are now unclear,

tarnished by Connor's influence and her time as a higher being (during the break between the show's third season finale and fourth season premiere). During this period, she saw and experienced the evils committed by Angelus (the name for Angel's soulless counterpart), and she doubts if she can love him romantically after witnessing his passion for destruction.

As tensions build, Cordelia is once again struck by prophetic visions, warning of an impending evil that is set to rise from the alley where Darla sacrificed herself and Connor was born only a season prior. Angel and his team combat various rising demon infestations around the city while researching this new threat, and the foretold creature, known only as the Beast, emerges, launching into battle with Connor— while pausing in front of Cordelia, seemingly acknowledging or recognizing her somehow. Connor wonders if he is somehow the cause of the apocalypse, since it arose from the place of his birth, and seeks comfort in Cordelia's arms, expressing romantic interest in her, though she remains hesitant as she served as his surrogate mother when he was an infant during the show's third season. However, as the sky begins to burn, and Cordelia doubts what her second chance at life may mean for the future, the pair have sex, with Angel spying on them from a distance.

The Beast continues to wreak havoc on Los Angeles, scheming to blot out the sun and plunge the city into eternal darkness; and when the Angel Investigations team learns that the secret to defeating the creature is "among them," Connor is the primary suspect, due to the two sharing a place of birth. However, their research (aided by the remnants of a now-destroyed Wolfram & Hart, the evil law firm that resurrected Darla and once conspired to retain Angelus for their purposes) draws a connection between their foe and Angel, rather than Angel's son— except the information they require is locked within Angel's soulless counterpart (Angelus), and somehow blocked from the ensouled Angel's memory. Believing it to be their final option, the

Angel Investigations team enlist the help of a mystic to temporarily remove Angel's soul— unleashing the vicious Angelus onto an already-weakened city— in hopes of learning more about the Beast's origins. Cordelia seems to be the only one who can convince Angelus to talk, though she is reluctant to reveal how she coerced him into cooperating, and a new problem arises— Angel's soul, which was contained in a vessel for safekeeping during the ritual, goes missing. Angelus reveals that, while he had worked with the Beast once before (during the late 1700s), he doubts that the monster is capable of orchestrating an apocalypse. Instead, there is a superior creature pulling the strings; this information sends the team reeling, and Angelus manages to escape from his imprisonment. And, as the pieces fall into place, the identity of the mastermind is revealed to the audience (but not to the characters): it's Cordelia.

Angelus, now free to roam the city, joins the Beast on their shared quest for evil. The Beast describes how all of the preceding events— Angel getting his soul removed, the near-total darkness, even perhaps the rising tensions within Angel Investigations— were orchestrated by the higher power known to the viewers as Cordelia. However, even as Cordelia is seen talking to the Beast, she behaves abnormally— she kisses the gruesome creature and speaks in an unfamiliar cadence, prompting viewers to question whether or not she is acting of her own volition. Meanwhile, Wesley— now the de facto leader of the group due to his expertise on all things vampiric and mystical— seeks out an old ally, Faith the Vampire Slayer, who is currently serving a prison sentence for killing a human during her time on *Buffy*. Though Wesley and Faith had disagreed frequently in the past, he knew of her loyalty to Angel, who had helped rehabilitate Faith previously in the series, and Wesley convinces her to break out of jail in order to hunt down Angelus and retrieve him alive, rather than merely kill him. This decision stirs up controversy amongst the Angel Investigations team; Connor, who continues to hold a grudge

against his father (regardless of whether or not his soul is intact), feels determined that Angel deserves to die, and Faith dismisses him from her retrieval team. Instead, he remains at the home base with Cordelia, who seems to be suffering from continual visions and migraines that render her significantly weakened. Cordelia, as well, seems perturbed by Wesley's decision to seek Faith's assistance; the pair knew each other back in Sunnydale (during the events of *Buffy*'s third season) and frequently butted heads, but their current conflict seems to stem more from Cordelia's newfound penchant for evil— and her uncertain alliance with the Beast.

Angelus and Faith battle, and while Faith is nearly killed in the proceedings, Angelus turns on the Beast and kills him instead, returning light to Los Angeles in the process. Connor shares this news with Cordelia, who is less-than-pleased to learn of her minion's defeat, she reveals a startling fact to him: she's pregnant. Connor is in disbelief from this news, and overcome with a flood of emotions, while the team continues to hunt down Angelus— who has begun hearing a deep voice in his head, belonging to someone claiming to have controlled the Beast, revealing themselves as the orchestrator of the coming apocalypse. Though Angelus is still ignorant to its origins, the audience is granted footage of Cordelia communicating with him through some sort of mystical intercom. She even refers to him as her “dear boy” and “my sweet”— one a term of affection used by Darla for Angelus during their century-long romance, and the other an oddly-feminine phrase for what is presumed to be a male demon pulling the strings.

As Angel Investigations works to develop a new strategy, Cordelia and Connor discuss her unexpected pregnancy, and she commands him to keep the news a secret, stating: “They wouldn't understand. Our baby is growing so fast. It would scare them, and that fear might make them want to kill it. Like they wanted to kill you. But trust me, Connor, it won't be too long.

They're all going to know what's growing inside me" (season 4, episode 14, "Release"). She categorizes the fetus as an "it," removing gender from the equation and dehumanizing the fetus while reinforcing the relationship between herself and Connor as the key factor in this situation. Her choice of language here also serves to manipulate Connor's emotions about his own origins in order to protect her secrets— including her previous coalition with the Beast, and her possession of Angel's soul. Soon, though, Angelus' soul is returned to him, thanks to Faith (whose departure from *Angel* leads to her return to *Buffy*'s final season), and as the majority of the team celebrates their leader's return, Cordelia reveals her pregnancy— and that she's far further along than anyone thought.

The team reels from the news of Cordelia's pregnancy, recalling the terror and uncertainty they experienced only a season prior when Darla arrived to reveal her own mystical pregnancy with Connor. As they question what her pregnancy might mean for their future, Cordelia proclaims it to be a sign of good, not evil: "My sweet baby. We're connected. I feel what it feels and I can't explain it but I sense its goodness... its love" (season 4, episode 16, "Players"). Unbeknownst to Cordelia, the team suspects that *she* is the one who had previously pulled the Beast's strings, as Angel recalls that the booming voice within his head, while he was Angelus, used an identical phrase to Cordelia in her pregnancy announcement: "my sweet"— and as the pieces fall into place, they attempt to subdue her, but Connor, desperate to protect his unborn child and the woman he loves, disarms them, and the pair flees together. Back at the Hyperion Hotel, Angel suggests that Cordelia is under someone else's control, and the team questions whether or not "their" Cordelia (the woman they've known for years) has been hijacked by something, or someone, since returning from the higher plane at the start of the show's fourth season.

Meanwhile, Cordelia and Connor discuss the future of their makeshift family, and Connor questions why the team had sought to capture Cordelia rather than help her. She once again manipulates him by reinforcing his distrust in Angel, positing that the vampire has turned the others against them, either out of jealousy over Cordelia or disdain for his son. She also continues to build up Connor's ego in order to further establish his dependence on her and only her, suggesting that the pair are "special... and our baby is going to be extraordinary" (season 4, episode 17, "Inside Out"). As Connor's anxieties fester, he worries that the longer they wait for their child to be born, the more danger they will find themselves in; Cordelia crafts a plan to speed up its impending birth, coercing Connor into bringing her a young blonde woman as a sacrifice, though he questions the brutality of the act. Cordelia's argument is simple—"her blood for our baby"—and prepares for the mystical birthing process. As he waits, Connor sees a vision of Darla in the place of the blonde sacrifice; it's the first time he's ever seen his mother, as she committed suicide in order for him to be born in the show's third season, and she claims to have brought a message for him from the Powers That Be (the Buffyverse's form of immortal and all-seeing deities). She urges him not to kill the young blonde, regardless of Cordelia's beliefs, stating that killing an innocent can never be forgiven, and begging him to not denigrate her own sacrifice by committing such evil acts. Though she too committed evil acts, she associates that with her lack of a soul, and argues that Connor, who has a soul of his own, must choose to be better, and he begins to untie the sacrificial girl until Cordelia arrives to stop him. Cordelia and the vision of Darla vie for Connor's allegiance, but in a fit of rage, he commits to Cordelia's violent path, allowing her to murder the girl—who, through Connor's eyes, is one and the same with the mother that abandoned him—and begin the ritual.

Back at Angel Investigations, the team discovers more about Cordelia's newfound evil nature, and it is revealed that whatever has hijacked her body is set to give birth to itself, in a bastardization of the circle of life. All the events preceding this— the tragedies faced by the team, the coupling between Darla and Angel, Connor's birth and subsequent kidnapping, and even Cordelia's brief stint as a higher power and her return, albeit without her memories, to Earth— were orchestrated to bring about its arrival into the world, laying a foundation for its eventual reign. The only way to prevent this evil being from emerging is to eliminate the host body, killing Cordelia in the process, and the team grapples with the possibility of murdering their beloved friend. However, the choice is now out of their hands, as an earthquake rocks the city and Angel rushes to locate Connor and Cordelia; when he finds them, Cordelia professes that “the beginning of a new world” is coming as she writhes in agony, before a bright light appears. When it fades, a glowing tentacle-clad monster appears for a moment, before revealing a tall, dark-skinned, adult woman in its place. Angel and Connor stare in wonder at her, sinking to their knees worshipfully, finding her simply irresistible for reasons yet-unknown to the audience, as she grins.

The adult progeny of Connor and Cordelia, now named Jasmine, quickly asserts herself as a savior of the struggling people of Los Angeles, granting wishes and instilling a sense of peace and optimism within everyone she meets. However, her arrival comes at a cost; Cordelia, after the traumatic experience of Jasmine's mystical birth, is trapped in a coma, though Jasmine encourages the Angel Investigations team to pay it no mind— and Cordelia goes largely unmentioned for most of the final few episodes of the fourth season. Soon, Jasmine is revealed to be less worthy of praise than previously thought; in order to sustain her beauty and strength, she must kill and consume a few humans per day, preying upon the world's immediate adoration of

her in order to maintain a steady stream of victims. The “spell” of blind worship that she has cast over Los Angeles is broken when her followers are exposed to her blood; in doing so, her grotesque nature— as a former member of the Powers That Be, cast out for her desires to manipulate the creatures of Earth through mind control and a removal of their free will— is revealed, replacing her aesthetic features with a gruesome face of maggots and rotting flesh. The only person not affected by her spell, both to present herself as divine and to mask her true form, is Connor, who willingly aids her due to his own warped psyche and history of complex trauma. Though he knows Jasmine is wholly evil, he stands by her side, as she is the only one of his family— first his mother Darla, who killed herself, then his surrogate father Holtz, who brainwashed him, then his biological father Angel, who he has never trusted, and finally his lover Cordelia, who used him and who secretly harbored Jasmine within her— who did not deceive him under the guise of love.

Jasmine’s powers grow, and even as Angel and his team break free from her mind control through blood magic, she begins to recruit devoted followers to serve as an army, deemed the Body Jasmine, as she considers them an extension of herself. In seeking a way to defeat her, Angel learns that revealing her true name— thought to be lost to history— can ultimately break the hold of her mind control powers, and he broadcasts it to the people of Los Angeles, rendering her not only powerless but physically deformed as well. She and Angel face off against each other, arguing whether or not free will is a price worth paying for eternal peace and happiness, and though it appears their fight concludes in a stalemate, Connor arrives; he at first appears to side with Jasmine, but quickly turns on her and smashes his fist through her skull, killing her instantly. In a rare vulnerable moment between Connor and his father Angel, he reveals that he knew all along that Jasmine’s utopian design was flawed, but after the loss of Cordelia, and the

repeated trauma he faced throughout his still-young life, he felt that Jasmine was the only one who would not inevitably abandon him. Connor continues to spiral, attempting to execute a mass murder through a staged bombing, and Angel manages to subdue him, agreeing to work for the now-reopened Wolfram and Hart (the evil law firm that orchestrated Darla's resurrection in the show's first season) in order to wipe his son's memory, give him a new life with human parents, and make everyone forget the devastating events that befell Connor and Cordelia within the past year— everyone except Angel himself, as the fourth season ends.

5.2 ANALYSIS

Angel's fourth season was not without its fair share of controversies, both in terms of on-screen arcs and behind-the-scenes conflicts, that contributed to the complex nature of its production and overall lukewarm reception by its fans. The nature of Cordelia's physical possession, pregnancy, and eventual birth of the inhuman deity and primary antagonist of the season's concluding arc, Jasmine, employs a variety of concepts present in traditional horror media— including the idea of an “innocent” mother giving birth to a violent offspring, and the framing of a haunted or demonic womb— while also offering us a heavily-gendered lens of analysis in order to explore how motherhood, manipulation, and power may intersect. However, this storyline also presents us with a unique opportunity to move past the contextual elements present in the season's run of 22 episodes, by allowing us to dissect the patriarchal structures of Hollywood within the context of the multiple levels of abuse suffered by actress Charisma Carpenter at the hands of showrunner Joss Whedon and question what lines of demarcation, if any, can (or perhaps *must*) be drawn between on-set interpersonal conflict and on-screen character betrayal.

To begin, I acknowledge that, of the three primary pregnancy arcs within *Angel*, the fourth-season storyline of Cordelia, Connor, and the rise of Jasmine is perhaps the most well-studied and publicly-analyzed; I would be remiss if I did not give credit to Jennifer Crusie (a romance novelist and author of “The Assassination of Cordelia Chase”) and Kwasi D. Tembo (a social sciences lecturer, film critic, and author of “The Curse and the Chora: The Double-Bind of the Choraic Conduit in *Angel* and *Penny Dreadful*”), whose writings on this topic served as the inspiration for this thesis in its entirety. Their work in the analysis of *Angel* have been instrumental to my own research, and I want to begin with an explanation of Tembo’s framework of “Choraic conduits” in order to establish the pre-existing theories around this storyline before synthesizing my own perspectives within this field. Tembo, drawing upon the works of Barbara Creed and Julia Kristeva (two theorists featured heavily in my own Literature Review section) defines this “Choraic conduit” as a subject uniquely positioned with a level of supernatural power that is both tied to their respective sexual identities and inherently limited or controlled by the male characters that exist around them. In the case of Cordelia Chase, this refers to her transformation from a wealthy and physically-attractive teen mean girl on *Buffy* to her mature, working-class and supernaturally-endowed (through her “gift” of visions of the future from the Powers that Be) member of the Angel Investigations team.¹¹ Throughout the series she is unable to consummate any of the romantic relationships she desires, including a pairing with a half-demon champion named the Groosalugg (as sex with him would transfer the visions to him and weaken the Angel Investigations team’s ability to prevent mystical disasters) and her growing

¹¹ Even the origin of Cordelia’s visions is a sexual one; a close friend and half-demon named Doyle, sent to aid Angel as an emissary of the Powers that Be at the start of the series, bestowed them upon her through a magically-laced kiss before sacrificing himself in season 1, episode 9, “Hero.” She was briefly horrified by his decision to curse her with these visions, and attempted to pass them on by kissing a variety of supporting characters during the show’s first season.

romance with Angel (due to his “perfect happiness” curse that is often conflated to sexual intercourse throughout both *Buffy* and *Angel*). Even the language that Cordelia herself uses to characterize her precognition, though played largely as a joke, references this double-bind of her sexual identity; she refers to her powers as her “visionity” (a play on the word “virginity”) that she must protect with not only her life but a sense of forced celibate martyrdom and “cursed purity” (Tembo 2020, 110).

While the fourth season of *Angel* finally positions Cordelia to have sex on screen for the first time since receiving the gift/curse of visions back in the show’s debut season, and perhaps break free from the restrictive hand of patriarchy within this concept of Choraic energy, the “Cordelia” we see on screen is not at all the one we have come to know and love throughout a combined six seasons of *Buffy* and *Angel*. Instead, she is already playing host to Jasmine, a renegade former member of the Powers That Be who had piggy-backed back to Earth following Cordelia’s brief stint as a higher being.¹² When the Angel Investigations team attempted to restore an amnesiac Cordelia’s memories in “Spin the Bottle” (season 4, episode 7), they unknowingly and accidentally freed the essence of Jasmine instead, who managed to control Cordelia’s physical form and use it to commit various crimes, including colluding with the Beast to send Los Angeles into darkness. Jasmine also utilizes Cordelia’s body, through sexual intercourse with Connor, in order to allow herself to be “reborn” with her own physical form; the eventual birth scene reveals Jasmine as an adult woman and renders Cordelia’s body, weakened by months of Jasmine’s possession, to be bound in a mystical coma.¹³

¹² Because of this, I have chosen to utilize the stylization of “Cordelia,” in quotation marks, to refer to any actions committed by the physical form of Cordelia while under the possession and mystical mind control of the entity known as Jasmine.

¹³ Cordelia never awakens from this coma for the remainder of the series, despite a brief fan-service appearance in the show’s special 100th episode (season 5, episode 12, “You’re Welcome”), in which she provides Angel with spiritual guidance before dying in her sleep.

The sexual encounter between “Cordelia” and Connor in “Apocalypse, Nowish” (season 4, episode 8) is seen as contentious for a variety of reasons; first, Cordelia served largely as a surrogate mother for the infant Connor during the show’s third season. She and Angel, who were flirting with the possibility of a romantic relationship at that point, were the primary caretakers for Connor in his first few months, and when Connor was kidnapped (though he later returned as a magically-aged-up teenager), she mourned his loss heavily, referring to him as a member of their family. As well, Connor’s age upon his return is not stated outright within the canon of the show, and statements from the show’s writers suggest he is either 16 or 18 years old, though no specific age is ever confirmed; Cordelia, meanwhile, is believed to be 22 years old in the show’s fourth season (given that she graduated high school in *Buffy*’s third season at age 18, and aged one year per season of *Angel*). While a four year age gap is not inherently controversial, if one assumes that Connor’s age of 18 upon his return is indeed accurate, the fact remains that their coupling is tainted by the twinges of incest given the maternal relationship between Cordelia and an infant Connor during the previous season— and the possible reading of Connor as an Oedipal figure through encoded discourses.

The Oedipus Complex in literature and contemporary media is a psychoanalytic theory, originated by Sigmund Freud, which draws its name from the Greek myth of tragic hero Oedipus. According to the myth, Oedipus accidentally fulfilled a prophecy that stated he would kill his father and marry his mother, thus bringing devastation to his family and land of Thebes; his birth parents, hoping to avoid the prophecy’s curse, abandoned him to die as a baby, but he was rescued and raised by a new family and believed the prophecy pertained to his adoptive parents. However, as he grew up, he set out on his own journey, killed an elderly man in the process, who turned out to be his birth father, and won the hand of a widow, who turned out to

be his birth mother. After learning what he had done, his mother hanged herself, and Oedipus committed suicide by gouging out his own eyes, and the story was cemented as an enduring representation of the flawed nature of humanity and the unwavering pull of destiny. Freud's interpretation for psychoanalytic purposes, simplified the myth, referring instead to a male child who develops a strong attachment to the parent of the opposite sex (their mother) and disdain or aggression to the parent of the same sex (their father); the child represses these emotions out of shame or fear of punishment.

Both the original threads of the Oedipus myth and the more contemporary understandings of the psychoanalytic theory emerge within the story of Connor, the mystical semi-human child born to two vampires, Darla and Angel. Though he never experiences any attraction to Darla (his biological mother who committed suicide in order to facilitate his death in season 3, episode 9, "Lullaby"— see Chapter Four), he develops a sense of possessiveness over Cordelia when he returns to Earth as a teenager towards the end of the show's third season. This intensifies into a romantic relationship in the following season, though Cordelia is now possessed by Jasmine; he serves as her protector, and the pair become intimate in "Apocalypse, Nowish" (season 4, episode 7). Connor also experiences severe aggression towards Angel, his father, particularly due to the manipulations of his surrogate father, Holtz, who raised him in Quor'Toth; he is both verbally and physically violent to Angel, even locking him into a deep-sea coffin at the conclusion of the show's third season. Though not explicitly related, Connor and Cordelia do share family ties, as she served as his surrogate mother during his infant stage; as well, though "Cordelia" at the time of their sexual encounter is under the control of Jasmine, Connor is unaware of this, and fully intends to engage in a romantic and sexual relationship with the woman who once raised him as her own. In the context of the "encoding/decoding" discourses

presented by Stuart Hall (see Methodology), we can see that threads of the Oedipus myth arise in the dynamics between Cordelia and Connor; these threads are encoded via supernatural plot devices that shift the focus away from Freudian theory, then decoded by audiences that separate the denotative parts of the storyline (their sexual intercourse and eventual birth of Jasmine) from the connotative elements—the disgust audiences feel about their relationship, and the emotional implications of Jasmine as, paradoxically, a figure of both rebirth and destruction. From a standpoint of meta-analysis, Jasmine herself is representative of Stuart Hall’s concepts of encoding and decoding at their purest forms; she encodes her desire to devour humans through the false ideals of creating a utopian society, and the Angel Investigations team decode this to reveal Jasmine’s more sinister intentions—this paradox is reinforced by Jasmine’s dialogue in her final moments, stating: “I murdered thousands to save billions” (season 4, episode 21, “Peace Out”). Jasmine is blinded by her own desires to reign over the people of Earth, truly believing that the sacrifice of innocent lives is justified—a rhetoric not unheard of in protectionism discourses and modern debates over gun violence.

The pairing of Connor and “Cordelia” also presents an issue regarding consent, given the co-opting of Cordelia’s physical form by Jasmine, which began during the gap between the show’s third and fourth season. It is arguable that both Connor and Cordelia are victims of sexual assault due to lack of informed consent regarding “Cordelia’s” plan to create a new and separate physical form to house Jasmine’s essence during her rise to power in the latter half of the season. As well, it is possible to suggest that “Cordelia” may have groomed Connor in order for him to participate in sex with her, once again as part of the overarching plan for Jasmine’s eventual appearance independent of Cordelia as a host vessel. Though the sex between Connor and “Cordelia” is often disliked by the show’s fans because of the pre-existing family dynamic

between the two characters, the question remains as to why the sex, and ensuing pregnancy and “birth” sequence, was a necessary or helpful vehicle for Jasmine’s arrival in the first place— as Jasmine was already present within the vessel of “Cordelia” and merely and magically emerged as an individual character by the end of the birth sequence in “Inside Out” (season 4, episode 17). The answers to this question, however, require us to look past the show’s contents and confront the real-life controversies surrounding the fourth season of *Angel*.

To begin, I want to recognize that pregnancy is considered a “protected class” under Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the amended Pregnancy Discrimination Act, as well as the Americans with Disabilities Act depending on an individual’s complex physical and medical needs during pregnancy, as enforced by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. These statutes state that it is illegal to discriminate— in the hiring process, firing process, employment conditions, accommodations, and as a form of harassment— against individuals who are currently pregnant, have been pregnant in the past, may become pregnant, may choose to abort, using contraceptives, or experiencing any medical conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth. However, because actors are typically considered contractors rather than employees, their contracts may have employment requirements that involve maintaining specific qualities of their appearance, physique, or other factors; regardless, employers are required to make reasonable accommodations in order to meet the needs and abilities of their employees. Why is any of this relevant to the content of the fourth season of *Angel*? Because Charisma Carpenter, the actress who portrayed Cordelia Chase, was pregnant.

Charisma Carpenter, who was between the ages of 32 and 33 at the time of the fourth season’s airing on The WB, had been attempting to begin a family with then-husband Damian

Hardy for several months, and suffered several miscarriages during the process.¹⁴ When she finally became pregnant shortly before the taping of *Angel*'s fourth season, she attempted to contact showrunner Joss Whedon to inform him of this development, though he initially avoided her calls. When the pair eventually met to discuss her pregnancy behind closed doors, he questioned whether she was “going to keep it,” before subjecting her to unsafe work environments, harassing her, and mocking her Catholicism... and eventually firing her shortly after she gave birth (resulting in her lack of appearances in the show's final season, save for the special 100th episode, as described in Footnote 8). These details were revealed in a Twitter thread penned by Carpenter on February 10, 2021, following other accusations of Whedon's harassment and abuse as publicized by fellow actor Ray Fisher.¹⁵ The alleged treatment Carpenter suffered at the hands of showrunner Joss Whedon are not only reprehensible— they are reflected in the decisions made by him and his co-writers for Cordelia to be possessed, impregnated by a mystical being, and eventually and carelessly killed off; these plot points, particularly in their usage of pregnancy as a vehicle for Cordelia's tragic demise, demonstrate Whedon's desire for retribution against the actress's personal decision to become pregnant. For the entirety of the fourth season of *Angel*— despite being physically present on screen— the character of Cordelia Chase is, for all intents and purposes, already dead. She begins the season as an amnesiac who distrusts her closest friends (Angel and his team) before regaining “her” memories (through the awakening of Jasmine's consciousness within her in episode 7, “Spin the Bottle”), and then has sex with Connor, fully commits to evil alongside the Beast, becomes

¹⁴ Though unconfirmed, it is rumored that Cordelia's brief absence from season 3 (between episode 14 and 18, when she returns to learn that the infant Connor has been kidnapped) was due to Charisma Carpenter suffering a tragic miscarriage at the time of filming.

¹⁵ The full details of Charisma Carpenter's statement can be found on her Twitter page, @AllCharisma (<https://twitter.com/AllCharisma/status/1359537746843365381>).

suddenly and visibly pregnant with what she claims is an “extraordinary” gift, and ends up in a coma by “giving birth” to Jasmine— who, technically, has just given birth to herself, given Jasmine’s possession of Cordelia until this point. At no time does the fan-favorite character of Cordelia appear in her genuine form, and when we *do* see her again, in the show’s special 100th episode (season 5, episode 12, “You’re Welcome”) she is given a brief and altogether canonically-unclear sendoff.

In discussing the cruel and careless treatment of Cordelia in *Angel*’s fourth season, I turn to a 2004 article by romance author Jennifer Crusie: “The Assassination of Cordelia Chase.” Written before the publicization of Whedon’s alleged harassment and abuse, and therefore basing its analysis solely on the evidence presented in the show itself, Crusie’s essay offers us an insight into why the decisions made regarding Cordelia Chase were not only the wrong ones, but also representative of sexist trends that gave way to the destruction of her character entirely, by breaking the first law of characterization: “Never violate your character’s core identity” (Crusie 2004, 187). And yet, this is exactly what the writers of *Angel* did, beginning with the third-season finale (“Tomorrow”) and continuing with vigor into the fourth season; Cordelia accepts, without questioning, the Powers That Be’s invitation for her to become a higher power, then seemingly abandons this role out of boredom and returns to Earth shortly into the show’s fourth season, overcomes amnesia, and aligns with the Beast. Of course, it is important to address that this is not *Cordelia*, but merely “Cordelia” with Jasmine pulling the strings, but Crusie addresses this, explaining that this entire plot (“Cordelia” having sex with Connor, becoming pregnant, and giving way to Jasmine) is an example of the dangers of “Gotcha” plot-writing. A Gotcha “is a trick that writers play on readers and viewers” in order to lull them into a false sense of security before subverting expectations; however, as Crusie says, “Readers want to be surprised; they

don't want to be betrayed"— and the Gotcha of Cordelia's hijacking by Jasmine is a crude example of the latter, rather than a successful demonstration of the former option. When it is finally revealed that "Cordelia" isn't who we believed, it's too little too late; "the continuing presence of Cordy's face and body on the show were a continuing violation" not only of the viewers' trust in the writers, but of the complex life and undeniable feminist legacy that Cordelia had led across *Buffy* and *Angel* (Crusie 2004, 195). Cordelia was an authentic (and human, during her time on *Buffy*) example of brains, brawn, and beauty without giving way to cliché stereotype, and all of that was flippantly cast aside for a fourth-season plot that, even before we learned of Whedon's transgressions, left few viewers entertained.¹⁶

At the same time that I am fascinated by Crusie's statements of how Cordelia's character arc was rapidly destroyed by the writers, I also find places to push back against her analysis, both in light of Whedon's now-revealed harassment of Carpenter during the pregnancy storyline and due to issues of focus and relevance within Crusie's overall discussion of Cordelia Chase. Crusie devotes several lengthy paragraphs to an analysis of Cordelia's goth-inspired wardrobe in the show's fourth season, even stating: "That Cordy came back with bad fashion sense was a real betrayal; that she came back and cuckolded Angel with a boy she'd considered her son was just gross" (Crusie 2004, 193). To an extent, I see the relevance, as much of Cordelia's character intrigue was built on her subversion of the idea of an airhead girl with stylish clothes; Cordelia dressed to the nines and wielded a flamethrower, but never let either factor outweigh the other, and used the often-scathing judgments about her love for a designer dress as a motivator rather than an insult as her critics intended. However, Crusie's focus on how "Cordelia," particularly during her pregnancy, "dresses like a drag queen and talks like a *Dynasty* reject" is a bit of

¹⁶ Season 4 of *Angel* received a failing "tomato score" of 67% from rating website RottenTomatoes.com, the lowest percentage of the show's five total seasons (<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/angel/s04>).

tasteless transphobia and sexism disguised as a substantial form of analysis (Crusie 2004, 195).

With the information we have now, regarding Whedon's decision to make Cordelia not only pregnant but also evil, as a result of Carpenter's real-life pregnancy, it's likely that these wardrobe choices were made out of spite rather than any relevant contribution to her character.¹⁷

There are plenty of valid criticisms to make about the character assassination of Cordelia Chase—this thesis was based on a desire to see these criticisms consolidated and fairly addressed—but outfit-shaming is far from one of them. As well, Crusie's pithy statement about how "Cordelia," by sleeping with Connor under Jasmine's control, "cuckolded Angel" strikes me as staunchly anti-feminist; though it is true that, in the show's third-season finale ("Tomorrow"), Cordy and Angel were meeting to discuss the possibility of a romantic relationship, this is far from a genuine depiction of cuckolding, and Crusie's attempts to use a fetish as a punchline falls flat amidst the reveal that Cordelia herself has been violated to such an extreme degree.¹⁸

Crusie's most salient point, however, returns to the idea of the Gotcha being poorly handled by the writers: "what might have been fun to watch had we been let into the secret before the Beastmaster seduced Connor becomes the extended rape and death of a much-beloved character" (Crusie 2004, 195). The possession and pregnancy arc that "Cordelia" experiences in *Angel's* fourth season are an outright sexual and physical violation of her body, as well as of her mind; given the added context of Whedon's response to Carpenter's real-life pregnancy, many of the decisions made within the writing of this plot arc are likely on-screen manifestations of his

¹⁷ As well, Charisma Carpenter revealed that Whedon frequently fat-shamed her and criticized her weight both before and during the pregnancy (she weighed 126 pounds at 4 months pregnant), so it is likely that these wardrobe selections were meant to call attention to how "fat" Whedon believed her to be.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that "cuckolding," according to Healthline.com, may refer to a scenario in which a partner (most often a male) gets turned on by the act of their partner having sex with someone else. Since Cordelia and Angel were not dating, and Angel is horrified rather than aroused by the sight of Cordelia and Connor in bed together, this metaphor is misapplied at best and offensive at worst. The involvement of the inactive partner being turned on is, of course, circumstantial, and Crusie's usage may have referred simply to the act of one partner being sexually unfaithful to the other. (<https://www.healthline.com/health/healthy-sex/cuckolding>)

behind-the-scenes anger with her actions, culminating in his decision to fire her from production at the conclusion of the season. And, perhaps most importantly, the fourth-season pregnancy arc was not even Cordelia's first foray into mystical pregnancy and possession tropes within *Angel*; in total, she was impregnated or parasitically-invaded three times over the course of the series, first by a Haxil beast in "Expecting" (season 1, episode 12), then by a Skilosh demon in "Epiphany" (season 2, episode 16), and finally in the season-long arc involving Jasmine at the center of this chapter. One pregnancy storyline is an example of random chance, and two is a coincidence— three times makes a pattern, and this pattern in particular points to an adherence to patriarchal control, impregnation as a form of subjugation, and a fundamental level of dissonance between character development and character destruction.

Jasmine herself also is worthy of analysis, though of a slightly different form— she is not only born as an adult rather than as an infant, but her corporeal form (portrayed by Afro-Latina actress Gina Torres) is also a woman of color, despite both of her "parents," Connor and Cordelia, being white. *Angel* as a series largely features only white characters and actors, save for a rare few people of color— notably main character Charles Gunn, the Black street-gang leader turned high-powered lawyer, his younger sister Alonna, and recurring character Gavin Park, an Asian lawyer at Wolfram & Hart— who, other than Gunn, are rarely significant to the plot. Because of this relative dearth of diverse characters, it is also possible to decode Jasmine's positioning as a Black monstrous woman as a harmful and racially-charged insinuation about people of color within the show's universe at large. However, pushing past the idea of race alone, Jasmine is uniquely situated in that her characterization— a seemingly-gorgeous woman who secretly consumes human life to further her goal of a modern utopia and features a decomposing, maggot-infested face in her true form— is dependent not only on her penchant for

evil, but the nature of this evilness as being born from an “enlightened white woman”— Cordelia, in her possessed form (Battis 2005). Though “Cordelia” (during her possession by Jasmine for the entirety of the show’s fourth season) is truly Jasmine in disguise, there is no real acknowledgement of Jasmine’s role, through Cordelia’s physical form, of seducing Connor (who is 18 at the time of this plot) into a sexual relationship, causing harm to the entire Angel Investigations team, and allowing the Beast to rise and wreak havoc on Los Angeles. Once the deception of Cordelia’s possession by Jasmine is revealed, Cordelia is re-enshrined as a tragic female victim at the hands of a monstrous person of color. As well, much of Jasmine’s own power— particularly in coercing her victims and in maintaining her thrall and control over the people of Los Angeles— is associated with her usage of her physical beauty as a “discursive weapon,” casting her sexuality and ability to seduce even Gunn (a fellow person of color, although male) as intrinsic to her identity as a Black woman; when she is killed by her own “son,” Connor, in order to end her reign of terror (disguised as a quest for utopian life), her destruction comes at the hand of a white man. Positioning not only Jasmine but her *body* (with its outward physical beauty and the unveiling of her true form as diseased and corrupt) as the “site of abjection and scapegoating for white negativity” reduces her Blackness, and deceptive benevolence, as a vessel for evil while the shell of Cordelia, now rendered into a coma, is spared such violent and symbolically-dark associations— though her own character arc, too, finishes via death and cruel dismissal despite its overarching relevance to *Angel*, both the series and its lead.

With the death of Jasmine, and the reduction of Cordelia’s character down to her immobile comatose form, we see the application of another popular television trope here— the act of “fridging.”¹⁹ The term comes from a 1999 website entitled *Women in Refrigerators*,

¹⁹ For more examples of this trope in action, and an explanation of the trope’s name origins, please see the TVTropes page “Stuffed into the Fridge.” <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/StuffedIntoTheFridge>

created by a group of feminist comic-book fans who sought to compile a list of female characters whose storylines had been cut short by injury, death, or depowering in order to further propel a male character's storyline. My *shibboleth of death* descriptor takes the idea of "fridging" a step further, positing that the female characters of *Angel* face death and depowering explicitly through the frameworks of pregnancy and maternity. For Cordelia, this assault is two-fold; first, her body is hijacked by Jasmine and commits evil acts through her possession, and then she is rendered powerless by the ensuing coma and the dismissive conclusion of her multi-season character arc. Yet again, a character with complexities and nuance unique to her femininity is ensnared in death linked exclusively to her existence not only as a strong and independent woman, but as a *pregnant* woman both on- and off-screen.

6 *ANGEL*, SEASON 5

Though significantly shorter than the two preceding pregnancy storylines, and far more rooted in the genre of strict science fiction rather than the more nebulous space of paranormal and supernatural media, the final season of *Angel* presents us with a unique setting in order to once again reaffirm the nature of pregnancy (and possession, to a greater extent in this particular storyline than its two predecessors) as a *shibboleth of death*; much like the bodies of pregnant women within these plotlines are hollowed out and abandoned as husks of former feminine identity, the very nature of pregnancy itself loses any of its more positive meanings— new life, growth, family, et cetera— in favor of stories of violent subjugation, patriarchal domination, and reductive simplification of vibrant and complex characters. In the words of Erin Harrington, whose work on the field of *gynaehorror* allows for a more comprehensive analysis of these tropes, we must confront the notion of pregnant subjectivity— the identity of the mother, the identity of the fetus (or its supernatural stand-in herein), and the spaces in which they not only overlap but compete with each other for domination. Harrington, too, provides the framework for reading Fred’s storyline not solely as a vehicle for the subjugation of her subjectivity but also as a representation of home invasions as a metaphor for rape and abuse, and the destruction of domestic spaces unique to female stories. These storylines, in particular, highlight this inherently “oppositional relationship” both through cinematic and narrative constructions to suggest that the pregnant, or possessed, female body is systemically abstracted in favor of whatever, demonic or human, good or evil, may exist within. In the case of the ungendered Illyria’s invasion and domination of the human woman subject Fred, the battle for domination is crystal-clear; Illyria reigns supreme, and Fred, though physically present through the conclusion of the series, exists only accurately as a memory within the minds of her male counterparts.

6.1 SOURCE SUMMARY

In comparison to the two preceding seasons, the fifth and final season of *Angel* (which aired from October 1, 2003, to May 19, 2004) does not involve an overt pregnancy storyline; instead, its final eight episodes feature a science-fiction adaptation of the traditional pregnancy trope, involving a parasite-esque ancient deity invading, and eventually conquering, the body of Winifred “Fred” Burkle, a scientist and primary member of the Angel Investigations team. This season of *Angel* situates its cast not as detectives nor vigilante crime fighters, as seen in previous seasons, but as corporate pawns of “Evil Incorporated,” the nickname given to the mystical law firm and recurrent antagonist of the series, Wolfram & Hart. Angel had assumed control of the firm in the finale of the show’s fourth season, in order to spare his son Connor (the child born from his relations with Darla two seasons prior). This new setting— and Angel’s decision to try and destabilize the law firm from within, rather than working against it on the outside, as he had previously— fundamentally altered the overall mood of the show, as well as positioned the characters within a new big-budget environment for its final season. Now serving as the head of Wolfram & Hart’s Practical Science Division, Fred finds herself inundated with shipments of mystical artifacts and overwhelmed with the responsibilities of the new position, aided only by a long-standing employee of the firm, Knox, who quickly develops an affection for his brilliant young boss— however, his sinister intentions far exceed flirtation.

The fifth season’s 15th episode, “A Hole in the World,” opens with a flashback to Fred’s origin story; she moved from a small town in Texas to Los Angeles to attend a physics PhD program, telling her worried parents that she promises to be “dull and boring,” before cutting to the present day, where she defeats large bug-like demons with a flamethrower alongside Wesley. The chemistry between the two of them has recently begun to intensify, and they begin making

plans for a first date; Wesley had harbored a crush for her for many years, and Fred had previously dated Charles Gunn and recently rebuked Knox's advancements, she appears to be developing a crush on Wesley at the same time. She returns to Wolfram & Hart, where a mysterious ancient sarcophagus covered in crystals and inscriptions has been unexpectedly delivered to the lab under her name; she and Knox begin to run tests on it to determine its origin and its contents, but all the results are initially inconclusive, which worries them. Seemingly under some sort of trance, Fred touches a crystal atop the sarcophagus's outer stone surface, and a small crevice opens, revealing a puff of unidentifiable smoke that clouds into her face and causes her to cough profusely, though she dismisses Knox's concerns about her health. A short time later, however, when she and Wesley are discussing upcoming dinner plans, she goes rigid, coughing up blood and experiencing a severe seizure, much to the alarm of the Angel Investigations team, who rush her to the in-house infirmary.

Fred's condition quickly worsens, and the team, aided by Knox, work to determine what has suddenly afflicted her; according to the resident doctors of Wolfram & Hart, she has been struck by an unknown parasitic agent that is causing her internal organs to rapidly and severely increase in temperature, resulting in unbearable pain and a likely death. Wesley's research points him towards the Old Ones—the original demons, driven out of the Earth dimension a millennia ago—and the Deeper Well—their burial ground; he learns that the sarcophagus was crafted to contain Illyria the Merciless, also known as the God-King of the Primordium: “a great monarch and warrior of the demon age.” He speculates that Fred is “being hollowed out so this thing can use her to gestate, to claw its way back into the world”; even as she grows weaker, Fred refuses to rest, returning to her lab to try and determine whether or not she can stop Illyria's hostile takeover of her form. When Wesley finds her, she states it outright: “I am not the damsel in

distress... I am not going to be cut down by some monster flu— I am better than that!” In tears, she describes Wolfram & Hart as a house of death, and reveals her fears about possibly dying at the hands of this previously-unknown deity known as Illyria, before begging him to take her to her apartment where she can seek respite.

Unfortunately, no amount of perseverance, research, or even violence (committed by Angel and his ensouled vampire compatriot, Spike, on her behalf) can seemingly stave off the inevitable; as Fred’s skin begins to harden and turn a worrying shade of blue-gray, and her cognitive function begins to decline, Wesley reads her an excerpt from her favorite children’s story, *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett— presumably to offer a semblance of comfort in her final moments. Meanwhile, the team continues to work; Angel and Spike take a private jet to England in hopes of examining the Deeper Well firsthand, and Knox and Gunn research alternative ways to prevent Illyria’s destruction of Fred. As the pair take a moment to express their shared adoration for the young scientist, Knox slips up, stating: “I practically worship it”— referring not to Fred and his affection for her but to Illyria itself. This reveals that he not only secretly orchestrated its invasion, but he specifically chose Fred to be the host vessel because he loved her and deemed her “worthy” of the deity he has worshiped for a decade. As Knox explains, he and several other faithful acolytes of Illyria helped to steal the sarcophagus from the Deeper Well and route it to Los Angeles (the God-King’s former kingdom); when the artifact got stuck in customs, Gunn unknowingly signed paperwork to grant its return to Wolfram & Hart as part of a complex negotiation for his own artificially-increased intelligence, ultimately co-signing the death warrant of Fred, his close friend and former lover. All the preceding events of the season have finally fallen into place: Angel’s decision to assume control of Wolfram &

Hart, Gunn's accidental endorsement of the sarcophagus' transport, and Knox's secret allegiance with the long-buried demon each contributed to Fred's demise.

Amidst a tender love confession between Wesley and Fred, as the episode cuts between her Los Angeles apartment and the moors of England, Angel and Spike learn that they must make an impossible choice: let Fred die, or save her— but allow tens of thousands of innocents to die in the process. Though they try to save her regardless, her condition quickly reaches a fever point; Fred convulses in agony, kicking herself out of Wesley's embrace, and then goes limp. Her eyes flash a vibrant blue, and she stands up, now tinged with the same blue-gray hues in her hair and skin; she looks down at her hands, seemingly inspecting her body for the first time, and says, in a haunted, empty voice: "This will do." Illyria's takeover of Fred is complete; the God-King of the Primordium has assumed control over its formerly-human host body. For the rest of the season, Illyria (whose cold and callous demeanor is a stark contrast to the bubbly, girlish attributes of Fred) occupies Fred's body outright, wavering between an uneasy allegiance with the Angel Investigations team and attempting to regain her power over a human-riddled world. Fred, in her true form, is never seen again; on occasion, Illyria shifts her physical form to appear as the young girl, and parodies her innocent and kind disposition, but Fred herself is lost to the ancient deity's control. The series concludes with Angel and his now male-dominated crew (consisting of Angel, Spike, a weakened Gunn, and a violence-focused Illyria following Wesley's untimely death) waging a fruitless war against the inherent evils of Wolfram & Hart, with no clear victory in sight, as an image of the heroes fades to black and the credits roll.

6.2 ANALYSIS

Unlike her predecessors— Darla giving birth to Connor, and "Cordelia" serving as the host body to Jasmine before birthing herself in an adult form— Fred's abjection and eventual

death in the fifth season of *Angel* does not follow the traditional elements of a pregnancy storyline; there is no inciting sexual encounter, nor an extended montage of an expanding belly or a painful yet fruitful birthing process. Her takeover at the hands of Illyria is far more reminiscent of a parasite gaining control over its diseased host, or an alien species invading and conquering a failing civilization, than any typical narrative of impregnation and maternity— and yet, this storyline not only holds true to *Angel*'s pervasive and patriarchal message, but represents it to its fullest extent: “a woman is a person until she gets pregnant, and that’s the end of her story” (King-Miller). Fred dies quickly and tragically, with little time for her to come to terms with her own fate, while her male counterparts (including an almost-lover, a former lover, and her employer) are shown mourning her loss, to varying degrees, for the remaining eight episodes of the series; they are given the dignity of space and time to grieve, while she is denied any chance to do so, as she is hollowed out and taken over by Illyria within the span of one 45-minute episode. The episode in question— “A Hole in the World” (season 5, episode 15)— opens with a reminder for the audience of Fred’s quiet origins, a timid scientist from the plains of Texas, before showing us her wielding a flamethrower in adulthood, approaching a new romantic relationship with coworker and long-time friend Wesley, and then dying in agony in his embrace. The audience, through these fleeting glimpses, is given even more of a heads-up of her impending demise than Fred herself— and yet, it’s still not enough time.

Despite, as previously stated, the lack of overt pregnancy imagery in the final eight episodes of the show’s fifth season (which outline the quick death of Fred and the extended adjustment-period to the God-King Illyria, who has taken over her physical form), the storyline still contains many elements reminiscent of more traditional pregnancy tropes, which contribute to this arc’s relevance within this analysis, as described herein. The young, innocent Fred is

suddenly “infected” with an unknown toxin (in this case, through inhaling the airborne particulates released by Illyria’s sarcophagus), grows rapidly ill as a result, and is killed by the emergence of what has incubated within her: Illyria itself, reluctantly using Fred’s body as a host vessel in order to reassert its power over a now-modern world. My usage of “itself” and “its” here to describe Illyria are intentional; in researching the God-King, before Fred’s body is fully destroyed, Wesley and the Angel Investigations team do not ascribe gender to its existence. Illyria is referred to solely as an “it” or by its many titles, including God-King of the Primordium— a term that carries some gendered language, as both “god” and “king” typically are associated with masculine or male entities, though no such distinction is made within *Angel*. It is perhaps most likely that, given Illyria’s status as an ancient pure-bred demon (known as a member of the Old Ones, the ruling leaders of pre-human times), gender was simply not a relevant factor; however, once Illyria asserts full control over Fred’s body, she/her pronouns are used consistently when addressing and discussing Illyria’s new quasi-human form. At the same time, however, it is worth positing that Illyria, particularly due to the God-King moniker, maintained a level of masculinist energy, and that its possession and domination of Fred is evocative of patriarchal control asserting over another, and certainly physically weaker, female body. In this way, the possible reading of Illyria as a masculine figure takes the concept of fetal subjectivity (and the privileging of fetal personhood) to a new and more severe level; if we cast Illyria as a male character invading the body of the female human Fred, not only can we see the emergence of fetal subjectivity to subjugate Fred’s own female subjectivity, but we can see Illyria as a representation of male subjectivity benefitting from the patriarchal nature of modern society (and her newfound role within *Angel*’s male-dominated team).

Illyria itself is not the only factor to consider when discussing the possession and destruction of Winifred Burkle; the God-King was not working alone in its infiltration of Fred, or the setting of Wolfram & Hart at large. Knox, a long-time researcher of Wolfram & Hart (who was employed there far before Angel Investigations assumed control over the law firm at the end of the show's fourth season, and likely not only aware of but complicit in the establishment's history of evil), was also a faithful acolyte of Illyria and served as its Qwa Ha Xahn, or high priest, in order to aid in its resurrection. Knox was tasked with selecting a new vessel for Illyria to possess in order to be freed from the confines of its coffin; because of his romantic interests in Fred—who initially flirted casually with him, before rebuking his advances and insisting on a more professional relationship as she served as his superior in the lab setting—he selected her to serve as Illyria's target. Despite Fred and Knox never having a physical relationship (save for a single kiss much earlier in the season), he effectively serves as Fred's rapist-by-proxy regardless of no overt sexual leanings in the Illyria storyline; without his scheming interventions, Illyria would never have been allowed to rise from its sarcophagus, or infiltrate and eventually conquer Fred's body. There are, of course, subconscious sexual implications present in this story arc; Fred is murdered thanks in part to a stymied love interest, and she dies on the eve of her first date with Wesley, her long-awaited lover (the pair share a few kisses, but no sexual contact, before her death in his arms). She is, for all intents and purposes, a virgin sacrifice for Illyria's rebirth.

Though, as stated previously, both Fred's mind and body are consumed fully by Illyria at the conclusion of "A Hole in the World," she does make limited appearances throughout the show's remaining seven episodes—only when Illyria wants her to, and only when Illyria remains in control nonetheless. This is most evident on two specific occasions: the episode "The Girl in Question," where Fred's parents, Roger and Trish Burkle, arrive in Los Angeles on

vacation hoping to see their daughter, and are unaware that she has recently died, and the episode “Not Fade Away,” where in a near-perfect reversal of Fred’s death seven episodes prior, Wesley is mortally wounded and passes away shortly before the series ends. In the first instance, Wesley is faced with the decision to either lie to Fred’s parents (who are only vaguely aware of their daughter’s involvement with the supernatural world) or reveal that she has been harvested by a warrior demon. While wracked with guilt and determining how to best approach the situation, Wesley is shocked to see Fred appear in Illyria’s place; when he confronts her, Illyria reveals that she can “appear as [she] chooses” by modulating her form, and that she felt it was more “convenient” to lie. Wes is horrified by how flippantly she treats the visage of the woman he loved, and demands she remain in her blue-tinged, aloof appearance for the remainder of their time together, stating “Change back... never be her” and reflecting his continued grief over Fred’s loss. Illyria once again invokes Fred’s appearance and demeanor in the series finale, “Not Fade Away”; Wesley, in accordance with Angel’s mission to wage war against a cult-like ring of villains known as the Circle of the Black Thorn, attempted to defeat Cvyus Vail, a powerful warlock. However, Vail manages to stab Wesley in the gut, inflicting a fatal wound as the man bleeds out on the floor; Illyria arrives, hoping to aid him in battle, but sees that Wesley is near-death. She cradles him in her arms, and in a moment of rare and seemingly-genuine emotion, asks him “Would you like me to lie to you now?” When Wesley nods, she morphs into Fred and speaks softly, sharing words of affection until he passes away, finally reunited in death with his true love as Illyria reverts to her hybrid form and returns to battle alongside Angel in his honor.

The relationship between Illyria and Fred, therefore, situates this storyline within a complicated discussion of maternal relationships; Illyria and Fred share a body, so their “constituent essences are inseparable” rather than existing as separate entities of mother and

daughter (Battis 2005). Illyria holds no remorse for her violent and all-consuming invasion of Fred's corporeal form, even while the surrounding members of Angel Investigations grieve her loss; she maintains a facsimile of Fred's appearance (at times parodying her, though not with cruel intentions) and serves as an eternal reminder of the multitude of female casualties that *Angel* as a series has accumulated since its start in 1999. Unlike Darla who committed suicide and turned to ash, or Cordelia who was relegated to an off-screen coma, or any of the other female characters who left the show or were unceremoniously killed off, Illyria remains; she is, as Jen Battis states in "Demonic Maternities, Complex Motherhoods," a 2005 journal article and study of familial relationships in the series, "the material absence of what their deaths left behind, the excess that can't be rationalized or dealt with simply." Illyria, and to an extent Fred (given the usage of her physical form to represent Illyria, regardless of the terse posture and new blue hue), occupies a privileged space in the series, because Fred's image is allowed to remain—and yet, at the same time, this phrasing suggests that these female characters, regardless of their varying fates, are reduced simply to their visual presentations. Their characterizations, their complexities, their lives and deaths and legacies, are all less important than what they represent as foils, love interests, villains, and victims for their male counterparts.

Why, then, is Fred uniquely positioned to both experience this precarious level of privilege while also still inevitably falling victim to its consequential failings? It's because Fred represents a very specific trope in the writer's world—the manic pixie dream girl; this phrase refers to a female character who is "stunningly attractive, energetic, high on life, full of wacky quirks and idiosyncrasies... she is inexplicably obsessed with our stuffed shirt hero," and Fred, in her appearances from season 2 (she was first introduced in season 2, episode 19, "Belonging")

to season 5, checks every single one of these boxes.²⁰ When she first appears, she has been held captive in Pylea (a demon dimension) for five years and is miraculously rescued by Angel and his team; the phrase “handsome man, saved me from the monsters,” which Fred states in “A Hole in the World” as the team hunts for her cure, is what she uttered when Angel first freed her from captivity as well. Shortly after being rescued and joining Angel Investigations at the start of the show’s third season, she had a brief crush on Angel (which could likely be characterized as hero-worship given his hand in saving her life), while also rediscovering her obsession with quantum physics, Los Angeles taco trucks, and the intersection of magic and material science. She then entered into a romantic relationship with Gunn before the pair split up in mid-season 4, and is on the cusp of a new relationship with Wesley shortly before her death. She is conventionally and aesthetically attractive— stick thin, with dainty bone structure— and every one of her plot points following her freedom from Pylea serves to further the development of the male characters around her, rather than her own— including, and perhaps most overtly, her possession and death at the hands of Illyria. Fred, even in the parasite storyline that eventually kills her, remains physically present (through Illyria’s usage of her body as a vessel) amongst the male-dominated cast— a privilege not awarded to Cordelia, whose character destruction and eventual coma a season prior rendered her largely forgotten despite being a main character. And yet, not even Fred’s status as a “manic pixie dream girl,” or a female character designed to uplift the male characters purely by existing, can save her from the inevitable death carried out by pregnancy, possession, and patriarchal control.

The final element of this storyline that demands analysis arises through a fleeting line of dialogue uttered by Fred once she is already undergoing Illyria’s transformation, and fighting

²⁰ Description of the “manic pixie dream girl,” as coined by film critic Nathan Rabin in 2007, taken from TVTropes.com (<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ManicPixieDreamGirl>).

futilely to prevent it in the Wolfram & Hart lab: “This is a house of death” (season 5, episode 15, “A Hole in the World”). This line— connecting Fred’s suffering to the space which caused it— is evocative of the theories of physical displacement and corporeal interiority (the designation of female bodies to exist within the domestic sphere) presented by Erin Harrington in her book, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (2018). Using the examples of *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Demon Seed*, Harrington posits that, rather than invoking ideas of physical “haunted houses” in other horror genres, the “bad house” in this case “may act as an extension of the minds, fears or personalities of those who live within it” (Harrington 2018, 99). In this case, Wolfram & Hart— the evil law firm now controlled by Angel and his team, despite serving as the overarching antagonist for the four preceding seasons— becomes the metaphorical house; we rarely see the characters, Fred included, in their homes, as they are seemingly always either at work or in communal spaces. The first time we see Fred’s apartment, throughout the entirety of the series, occurs as she dies from Illyria’s possession and Wesley comforts her in bed. Houses are designed to provide comfort, yet the “house” stand-in, the teeming tower of Wolfram & Hart, shepherds in only death and destruction; Fred’s aforementioned line of dialogue, then, may refer to both the physical building she inhabits as well as her own body, which is being harvested out (with her internal organs being liquified in order to make space for Illyria’s invasion) much like a ransacked residence invaded for material gain.

The metaphor of the house, as well, can be expanded further through a close reading of Harrington’s gynaehorror theory and spatial, salient rhetoric around rape and physical coercion: a home invasion. Though wildly inaccurate, and undeniably harmful to sexual assault victims, there remains a prominent analogy about theft/robbery, rape, and personal responsibility, suggesting that women’s bodies are equivalent to commodities that we should protect, lock up,

and not leave outside on dark nights. This language is dehumanizing, as it deems women no more valuable than property, therefore dismissing the construction of bodily sovereignty; at the same time, however, given the nature of a patriarchal society that “objectifies women and controls her through many means, including sexual violence, women’s boundaries are permeable and erasable. The objectification of woman eliminates her subjectivity and reduces her to her use-value, and the obliteration of bodily boundaries un-binds the interior, leaving women no space at all” (Harrington 2018, 102). While horror heroines like Rosemary Woodhouse are confined to their Gothic apartment buildings, Fred remains in the lab of Wolfram & Hart, where she serves as the head of the Practical Sciences Division; she attempts to re-assert her control over her lab and her life as it is systematically stripped away. Her status as a modern, independent young woman cannot spare her; this space, and its use as a metaphor for her corporeal body now hollowed for its new demonic inhabitant, is no longer— and perhaps never truly was— her own.

Fred’s story allows for a complex interpretation of the idea of female subjectivity and fetal personhood not present in the two previous arcs of Darla and Cordelia; though Fred is hollowed out and consumed by Illyria, her body invariably remains, unlike Darla who commits suicide and fades to dust, and Cordelia who is effectively shelved away in a mystical coma, makes one final appearance, and is largely forgotten. Fred, once Illyria assumes control, occupies an unstable positioning as being both *present* (as Illyria utilizes her body as a vessel and remains somewhat physically unchanged, despite new costuming, a modified voice, and blue-tinged skin) but simultaneously and wholly absent in her authentic form. Her pregnancy storyline at Illyria’s hands effectively kills her, but she is forced to remain visible as a pawn for the Old One’s amusement and manipulations, eternally subjugated and unable to be set free.

7 CONCLUSION

Each of the three pregnancy storylines within *Angel*— Darla and Connor, Cordelia and Jasmine, Fred and Illyria— offer a unique look into what it means to exist as a pregnant woman within a contemporary paranormal setting, and what it means to be devoured from the inside out (either by the fetus they produce, or the entire nature of their pregnancy) as a result of this predicament. I have coined the phrase *shibboleth of death* to describe this experience; more than just a vague association between pregnancy and their eventual demise, for the women of *Angel*, pregnancy is akin to the tolling of a death knell, and their lives are irrevocably destroyed by their impregnation and manipulation at the hands of their male counterparts. And yet, the details of these individual pregnancy storylines are not what truly matters in the end; instead, the emphasis falls upon the certitude of these women to be defined, and then subsequently damned, by the very nature of their liminal and subjective experiences with impregnation, maternity, and birth. No matter who they begin as— a centuries-old vampiress with a penchant for violence, a strong and outspoken human with precognitive powers, or a girlishly-sweet but shy scientist— all three of the women in these stories face the same inevitable fate: destruction and death in order to facilitate the coming of new life, a fetal subject which is immediately solidified as inherently privileged above their own existence.

At the same time, however, as I analyzed the violence inflicted upon and near-constant victimization of these three women throughout their traumatic pregnancies, I felt it necessary to contemplate the possibility of a more ambivalent reading of these stories, rather than considering them a condemnation and outright annihilation of female subjectivity in the face of their newfound maternity. Is there space for a more feminist interpretation of this trope, even within the masculinist confines of *Angel* as a series? Here, I return to a concept presented within my

introduction— despite the variations between these three storylines, the female characters themselves are invariably eliminated without being given the chance to re-establish an individual identity at the conclusion of their pregnancy arc; the pregnancies at large are the sites of these women’s collective demise. No matter how these stories are encoded through their individual plots and unique character backgrounds, they are inevitably decoded as sites of trauma, abuse, and subjugation— experiences they are, by the end of their stories, powerless to escape either through death or abject dismissal. The long-standing belief that pregnancy (and, by extension, birth and motherhood) are definitively noble acts in and of themselves— drawing from comparative religions scholar Joseph Campbell, who once said “Giving birth is a heroic deed, in that it is the giving over of oneself to the life of another” (*The Power of Myth*, 1988)— is one that, too, robs women of agency and subjectivity. It assumes that a woman’s sole aspiration is that of motherhood, and that they desire no further development of an independent hero’s journey; at the same time, it refuses to consider that pregnancy, in most cases, is a two-person endeavor, and the male perspective often reigns supreme. Of course, it’s worth acknowledging that the champion of this philosophy, too, is a man with no personal experience of bearing children. The soul-crushing nature of patriarchal society, from academic scholarship to state legislatures, is perhaps truly inescapable. Even through Campbell’s lens (which has been refuted by feminist scholars since its inception), however, the pregnancies of *Angel* take on a more sinister tone— the “giving over” of these women’s lives is not metaphorical but painfully literal, rendering them dead and destroyed in the wake of their often-fruitless labors.

Not only is pregnancy an invariable signifier of death for the women of *Angel*, and serves to reinforce a sense of masculinist and patriarchal control not only over women’s physical bodies but their reproductive and interpersonal agency as well, but these storylines also speak to

growing trends in the contemporary reproductive justice moment— namely, that of the romanticized fetus and the emphasis placed upon fetal personhood often at the dehumanizing expense of maternal subjects. I am reminded of Lauren Berlant’s 1994 essay “America, ‘Fat,’ the Fetus” which suggests that “the fetus is the most perfect unbroken example... of iconic superpersonhood”— because the fetus lacks a voice of its own, it is easily co-opted by groups that privilege the idealized American citizen, and promoted above the ranks of more unruly subjects that can, and often *do*, speak in opposition to such generalized and politically-charged movements (148). In the realm of *Angel*, the pregnant women protest their situations— Darla seeks an abortion, and Fred grapples for a scientific explanation for her mystical invasion, while Cordelia is possessed and rendered silent by the Higher Power occupying her body as a vessel— but they are effectively powerless, as their own subjectivity and autonomy is eclipsed by the mere existence of the fetuses that invariably invade, consume, and define them.

Darla, Cordelia, and Fred— these three women have very little in common when it comes to their initial roles within *Angel*, but they are united by their tragic ends; the pregnancies that quickly and unexpectedly dominate their character arcs also inevitably kill them, laying waste not only to their lives but also to the legacies they leave behind. For Darla, it is through suicide that she births her human son Connor; Cordelia is possessed by Jasmine and then abandoned, left in a coma and eventually passing away, a weak sendoff of a beloved character; Fred is invaded by a parasitic entity that hollows her out, allowing the God-King Illyria to regain power and status in the mortal realm once again. Their stories are inherently complex, at times contradictory, and undeniably devastating; whether they begin as victims or villains, heroes or helpless damsels in distress, their monstrous pregnancies render them as not only vessels for the children that destroy them, but as pawns for the manipulations and amusement of the males

around them— whether they be fellow characters or creators behind the scenes. Put simply, the women of *Angel* cannot escape their forced passivity; borrowing from feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, the woman exists merely as an over-sexualized spectacle or a fetishized object at the hands of masculinist control. These stories— and the multitude of other examples that position women’s agency as subservient to male desire through pregnancy and possession— serve as a visceral reminder of how women’s reproductive capacities and bodily autonomy have systematically been manipulated and eliminated, for patriarchal gain, through contemporary on-screen and behind-the-scenes discourses.

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