

Buffy vs. Sisyphus: Why the Chosen One is the Perfect Absurd Heroine

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[1] It is my conviction that the pop culture icon Buffy Summers of the quirky hit phenomenon, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is the epitome of Albert Camus's beloved absurd hero, Sisyphus. The "absurd" that Camus refers to is the seeming pointlessness of life. Sisyphus is a mythic figure punished by the gods to forever push a large rock up a hill, only to have it roll back down again once he has reached the top. He is doomed to repeat this fate for all eternity. To Camus, this is an allegory of the absurdity of life. Many of us feel that we are doomed to an existence of meaningless repetitive actions in our daily routine. At times, we stop and ask ourselves, "Why am I doing this?" When we become aware and start to live consciously, despite the purposelessness--this is what interests Camus in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In this paper, I will depict the distinct parallels between Buffy and Sisyphus throughout seasons one through six of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I will also examine in season seven, how Buffy changes the rules of the game, and breaks free of her destiny.

[2] Like Sisyphus before her, Buffy's proverbial rock to forever push up the hill is the endless slew of vampires and demons that she must slay sometimes nightly. As Buffy herself notes in more than one episode, often her fighting seems futile. She says at one point, "It just keeps coming" ("Spiral" B5020). Earlier in the series when she expresses this same lament, her vampire lover with a soul, Angel, encourages her not to give up fighting, because it is in fact an endeavor worth taking on, in and of itself ("Gingerbread" B3011). Angel, on his own path to

redemption, grapples with the futility of fighting the good fight simply because it is the right thing to do. A theme that recurs on both *Buffy* and *Angel* is that evil is everywhere, and will never stop. The question becomes, how do you choose to react to that?

[3] The character of Buffy begins on autopilot, a seemingly shallow, normal teen until she is ripped from her carefree social life in L.A. and chosen. As the introductory theme dictates from the beginning early episodes, in the voice of her watcher and teacher, Rupert Giles, "Into every generation a slayer is born: one girl in all the world, a chosen one. She alone will wield the strength and skill to fight the vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness: to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their number. She is the Slayer." ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" B1001)

[4] Buffy initially resists this call, but when innocents are continually put in peril, both strangers and those dear to her, she cannot ignore her responsibility and lead any sort of carefree existence. As a result, Buffy is downright miserable a lot of the time. She often complains of how she would love to be "gossiping about boys," or "even studying" ("Becoming, Part Two" B2022), but is forced to save the world again and again. We see as the series progresses that apocalypses come in plural form in Buffy's world. She is forever at the cliff's edge, struggling to make sense of the seeming futility of her own existence and everyone else's for that matter. Evil is so very prevalent, and things that make no sense lurk around every corner.

[5] To some degree, Buffy does have a choice. At the end of season one, she nearly gives up, stating that she is quitting because she does not want to die. After speaking, however, with a deeply distraught Willow, she realizes that she really is the only one who might be able to defeat the Master. She chooses to fight, in her prom dress readily armed with her crossbow and arrow.

[6] The way in which Buffy does not have a choice is that she was born a vampire Slayer.

She inherited her calling, activated when the chosen slayer before her perished. While she does not have a choice in her lineage, she does have a choice in how exactly she chooses to wield her power. Along with choosing her fights wisely, Buffy tries to make sense of her unique existence in this world. Camus fully recognizes the burning human need to make sense of things that are otherwise inexplicable:

"Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it.

Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it. One of the only coherent philosophical positions is thus revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency."

(Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays* 54).

Buffy grapples with the fact that her life may be extremely short-lived. She notes in "Fool for Love," "Look I realize that every Slayer comes with an expiration date on the package, but I want mine to be a long time from now. Like a Cheeto." ("Fool for Love" B5007)

[7] Buffy is literally at that edge when she takes Camus's leap of faith at the season five finale, "The Gift" (B5022). Buffy leaps into a force field of cosmic energy that could open portals to other worlds and lead the one the audience knows into chaos. She gives her life with an impassioned joy to save that of her sister, Dawn, who was supposed to be the one sacrificed to the portal. Viewers find out with the discovery of Dawn in season five, that she was once in fact a mystical "key," able to open doors between worlds and dimensions. She was given human form and hidden by monks in this fashion to be sent to the Slayer for protection. Since Buffy shares Dawn's blood, she realizes at the exact moment what she can do--and must. She must give herself to the open portal as a sacrifice because it needs blood to be sealed again. It so happens that the monks made Dawn out of Buffy, so they share that same blood. She leaps purposefully

to what could be viewed as suicide, but it is self-sacrifice for a greater good, not necessarily a rejection of life on the surface. It is also arguably one of the more moving moments captured in modern television history. We can feel Buffy searching herself, and see her enlightenment happen as she embraces "death as her gift." Rhonda Wilcox also emphasizes this significant turning point in the series. She writes, "Her sister Dawn. . . has been chained to the top of a giant tower. . . at which the opening is located and into which Buffy flings herself. Despite Dawn's offer, Buffy will not allow her fourteen-year-old sister to take that plunge." (Wilcox, 84). This is a prime example of Buffy recognizing and completely accepting her unique and "absurd" calling. She knows the plunge is meant for her alone.

[8] This strange concept of "death is your gift," is introduced to her by the very first Slayer. The first Slayer, or Primitive, makes her initial appearance as a potential threat in the episode, "Restless" (B4022). Buffy then learns of the phrase through the message relayed to her on a spiritual quest in season six, where she is revisited by this same first slayer.

BUFFY: I . . . have a few questions, about being the Slayer. What about... love?

Not just boyfriend love.

SPIRIT GUIDE: You think you're losing your ability to love.

BUFFY: I didn't say that... yeah.

SPIRIT GUIDE: You're afraid that being the Slayer means losing your humanity.

BUFFY (pausing): Does it?

SPIRIT GUIDE: You are full of love; you love with all your soul. It's brighter than the fire... blinding... that's why you pull away from it.

BUFFY: I'm full of love? I'm not losing it?

SPIRIT GUIDE: Only if you reject it. Love is pain, and the Slayer forges strength

from pain. Love. . . give. . . forgive. Risk the pain, it is your nature. Love will bring you to your gift.

BUFFY (confused by that last bit): What?

(“Intervention” B5018).

The first Slayer, serving as Buffy’s guide, is subtly trying to show her how to use her gift to her best potential. That in fact she should be fearless and love with all of her heart. That is precisely what will help her win the fight against Glory. Buffy may give up her own life, but she will save her sister’s--and ultimately, all humanities.’ Buffy’s impression of the first Slayer is that of a lonely savage, who she does not want to be, but in the end, it is this same character urging Buffy to use what works for her personally in finding her own Slayer identity.

[9] Buffy revolts against what Giles and the books tell her to do to close the portal. She refuses to kill her sister. She becomes consciously aware of her calling, and what the first Slayer was attempting to convey to her, just at the crucial moment. Camus expounds on these two key ideas:

"Consciousness and revolt, these rejections are the contrary of renunciation.

Everything that is indomitable and passionate in the human heart quickens them, on the contrary, with its own life. It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will. Suicide is a repudiation. The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance. This is a first consequence." (Camus 54-55).

To Camus, the act of accepting the absurdity of life is a defiant revolt, and the only way to live fully.

[10] As we learn when her well-meaning magically inclined pals raise her back from death in season six, every second returned to life is agony to Buffy. At first, she can only reveal privately to Spike, that when she died, "I was warm and I was loved and I was finished. Complete." ("Flooded" B6004) As the series comes to its conclusion with the climax of season seven, however, Buffy learns that she was far from finished or complete in her mission on this earth. Her leap also leads her to the possibility that there may be a higher power out there, although she never describes herself at any point in the series as religious, and is not "born again" when she comes back to earth. In effect, she takes both that leap to suicide and the leap to faith that Camus suggests, almost simultaneously. Buffy's leap off the tower could be viewed as a rejection of this life, as suicide. When she is brought back unwilling from the grave, she acknowledges the existence of a higher power of which she was not previously aware. Ultimately, she chooses neither suicide nor religion, and comes to living on her own terms. Part of this transition is revealed during the closing scenes of the last episode of season six. Dawn also shares in Buffy's journey here, as pointed out in this Slayage essay:

"During the episode 'Grave,' Buffy realizes that Dawn is growing up and that she already is caught up in all of the Scoobies' problems. Rather than excluding her for being both non-human and too young to defend herself, Buffy realizes, "I got it so wrong. I don't want to protect you from the world. I want to show it to you. There's so much I want to show you" (Bates et. al.43).

[11] Buffy is raised from a grave by her friends at the beginning of season six, only to have to learn numerous harsh life lessons and come full circle by the end of that season. She is forced to climb out of a grave a second time, literally repeating the action until she has learned her lesson. Ironically, it was Willow who raised her and Willow who later attempts to put her

back. When Buffy emerges with Dawn, it is with a newfound understanding of how she can approach her life and the demons that she must face, both external and internal. As Camus states,

"Living naturally, is never easy. You continue making gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering." (Camus 5-6).

When Buffy recognizes that she does not have to act out of habit, but intention, a whole new world opens up to her.

[12] In the musical episode, a theme is reiterated by Dawn that was first spoken by Buffy herself, "The hardest thing in this world is to live in it" ("Once More With Feeling" B6007). It is later revealed that this was the last thing Buffy said to Dawn before leaping to her own death from the tower in Dawn's place. Dawn then repeats it to Buffy, to bring her back from a fiery dance of death nearly imposed on her by a demon, accidentally summoned by Xander. Buffy is having such a difficult time readjusting to life after being yanked out of heaven, and would almost rather die again than be forced to come back.

[13] The one area that separates Buffy from Sisyphus is that Buffy does what she does out of duty, for the greater good of all concerned. Sisyphus is supposedly being punished for "his scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life." (Camus 120). Buffy regains her passion for life at the end of season six, when she decides that she wants to "show the world to Dawn, not to shelter her from it." Looking more closely however, even here we can find parallels between Buffy and Sisyphus. Buffy has superpowers that tend to make many authority figures uncomfortable, including hell gods such as Glorificus (Glory) in season five. The Watchers

Council serve as judgmental gods, who repeatedly test and try to control Buffy when she does not play by their rules or is gaining more personal power. This is seen especially in the episode, “Checkpoint” (B5012), also in season five. Likewise, is not Sisyphus doing what he must do for all eternity for the greater good of man? He struggles passionately and forever questioning at that cliff's edge for the greater good of us all.

[14] In season seven, Buffy discovers that the first Slayer was created through magic. Not as a punishment like Sisyphus exactly, but a harsh assignment forced on a girl by a committee of men. Buffy opts not to take that dark power offered her, even if it might help her fight against her foe in that season. She has a fundamental issue with the way it was imposed.

[15] Yet Buffy knows her fate and no matter how she tries to run away and escape, it will find her and bring her back to it repeatedly. Because she is a bright and passionate young woman, she is not satisfied with simply accepting this. Her quest to find meaning continues. As Camus notes, "But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins' – this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness." (Camus 13). Buffy asks a similar “why,” particularly at the end of season six when she pointedly inquires of Giles, "Why was I called back?" Giles shakes his head, as he has no clear and pat answer for her (“Grave” B6022). Buffy wants answers as to her very existence, which defies logic to her. The question of one's existence is a recurring Camus theme. Life "is not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments" (Camus 38). Buffy begins to understand this lesson when she accepts Dawn's becoming a young woman who cannot be sheltered anymore.

[16] Camus's thoughts are compatible with seasons five and six in Buffy's journey. Buffy must accept her consciousness as a heroine.

"If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."

(Camus 121).

Camus goes on to write, "If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy." (Camus 121). When Buffy accepts all of the pain, the sorrow, and the love--she begins to find her joy. Buffy always fights. When all else fails she fights--passionately. She lives with it, but never totally accepts her fate. She eventually is able to live her life on her own terms with her discovery in season seven. The end of season five was a turning point for her.

[17] Seasons six and seven became very dark indeed, and caused controversy with viewers at the time. Viewers who were used to the show's humor, and always assured that the Slayer and her Slayerettes would persevere were not prepared for what would occur in seasons six and seven. They were not prepared for Warren to kill his ex-girlfriend, or Buffy to start a racy affair with Spike. They certainly were not prepared for Willow to become a magic junkie and then pure evil herself, turning on those who loved her most. These developments, however, were some of the necessary evils for Buffy's character to directly address the Camus quandary presented to her from the beginning of the series. Buffy needed to be bad with Spike to realize that she needed more out of a relationship and be true to herself. She needed to fight Willow to fulfill her duty as a Slayer, even though Willow was her best friend. She refused to kill Warren

because he was human, and “being a slayer doesn’t give me a license to kill” (Villains, B6020).

Part of the series' initial appeal to loyal watchers came from the witty quips made by Buffy when facing horrific and unimaginable beasts. For some fans, the later seasons' progression of delving into the shadowy sides of the central characters and tackling the murkier depths of life proved too unsettling. Here is a sampling of fan posts from the website, *I'm Re-watching 'Buffy:' A Very Depressing Review of Season Six*, by Gaby Dunn:

"What's amazing about this season is that it proves each character is capable of crossing the dark side and committing something horrible. Willow has her magic overdose and murders a human, Xander leaves a woman at the altar and lets his insecurities motivate his misogynistic behavior, Dawn steals, and Buffy physically, emotionally, and sexually abuses Spike. Two recurring characters that were repeatedly saved by Buffy, Jonathan and Andrew, become villains..."- Kirk

"I completely disagree that it's a "great" season. In my opinion, season six was a terrible season, because it lost all semblance of itself. There's a big difference between a change in direction and getting so lost that you can't find your way back to the path again. Characters were developed, certainly, but almost none for the better..."- Serra

"I feel like one of the overlooked aspects of this season is what essentially was Willow's rape of Tara. She magically alters her mind in order to maintain the relationship, and if magic=drugs, then she has drugged her..."- Beef

To be sure, there was absurdity presented in season six in abundance. Camus states that the

absurd is "a confrontation of this absurd world and the wild longing for clarity" (Camus 21). He adds, "It is impossible and it is contradictory...and –"It is an unceasing struggle." (Camus 29, 31). Although there were apparent character contradictions that some viewers had a problem with in season six, they were all part of Buffy's personal growth and set the stage for season seven to unfold.

[18] Buffy comes to face how absurd life is, but does not ever completely accept things as they are or seem to be. At the end of season seven and the series, unlike Sisyphus, she makes a conscious plan to rebel against the old laws and rewrite her own legend. With the assistance of her friend Willow, she unleashes an army of absurd heroes; other Slayers all over the world who were called to fight the good absurd fight. It does not make her any less weary, but it does take the sole burden of the weight of the world off of her shoulders somewhat. Through the help of magic, Buffy rewrites the legend. She is no longer the chosen one. Many are chosen, and they can now unite to assist each other in the unceasing struggle against the forces of darkness.

[19] What Camus envisions, as an ideal world is not far from what we finally view in Buffy's. The very last shot viewers see of her in the television series is Buffy standing at the edge of the huge gaping hellmouth that was Sunnydale, the place that ultimately formed her as a young woman. This is the place that she matured and developed a strong sense of self, beyond just her calling. This time she does not jump. She stands, taking it all in, a conflicting mixture of emotions on her face. Buffy sees the absurdity of the world in all of its many forms, and viewers kind of love her because they know that she will never give up the fight, no matter how pointless it will appear to become.

"It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured

step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock." (Camus 120-121).

Does Buffy parallel Sisyphus from start to finish, then? I assert that for all of her pre-destiny, she breaks free of Sisyphus' fate and surpasses him in the end. She has options. She could go the first route of bad girl slayer, Faith, or forever stay an "I am no one" runaway ("Anne" B3001). She could completely reject the world that she knows and allow herself to be institutionalized, as seen in the imaginary scenario in "Normal Again" (B6017). Buffy turns her back on all of these options. She embraces the life of the absurd hero over any other. In effect, she changes the world and becomes instead a Sisyphus triumphantly pushing the rock down the other side of the hill.

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