

## When "Until the End of the World" Means It: Love, Blurred Morality, and Spiritual Warfare in the Buffyverse and Ennis and Dillon's *Preacher*

As we try to go about our lives, we face a crisis of unprecedented proportions. Politically, morally, and spiritually, our society is barely being held together as dark forces threaten everything we hold dear, and everything we have fought for for so long. Everything has become confused, lost its center, and people today can scarcely tell right from wrong. And if something isn't done soon, all will be lost.

Recently, the speeches of leaders, authorities, "experts," and politicians have come to sound increasingly like something you would hear in an episode of *Buffy* or *Angel*. Perhaps Buffy rallying the troops to fight the First Evil, or Angel preparing to take on the Senior Partners of Wolfram & Hart. To some degree, this kind of "the sky is falling" rhetoric occurs in every generation, in times of social change and upheavals. But while none of this is new, we have seen changes taking place at a much faster rate; while large-scale change used to take centuries, the world of 50 or 100 years ago seems scarcely recognizable to us now. When change happens on this level, the institutions we create to make sense of everything in our lives struggle to keep up. Joseph Campbell, in *The Power of Myth*, says, "the models have to be appropriate to the time in which you are living, and our time has changed so fast that what was proper fifty years ago is not proper today. The virtues of the past are the vices of today. And many of what were thought to be the vices of the past are the necessities of today. The moral order has to catch up with the moral necessities of actual life in time, here and now" (13).

As an integral part of how we make sense of the world, many works of popular culture have attempted to address this issue. And while much of the public debate seems to center between accepting outdated institutions and complete anarchy (or the dreaded "moral relativism"), many popular creators have tried to navigate a path to living with issues such as faith and morality in the modern world. One such attempt, of course, is the "Buffyverse" created by Joss Whedon. Another, with which people here may not be as familiar, is the comic series *Preacher*, written by Garth Ennis and illustrated by Steve Dillon. For those who are not familiar with *Preacher*, it is the story of Jesse Custer, a small-town Texas preacher who is losing his faith until he is possessed with an entity

called "Genesis," which is the bastard offspring of an angel and a demon. With the power Genesis gives him (which includes the ability to command people to do anything he wants), he learns that God has abandoned Heaven. Jesse decides that for God to just quit and abandon His responsibilities is a crime that demands punishment, he sets out to find the Lord and bring Him to justice. Joining him on his journey are his girlfriend (initially *ex-girlfriend*) Tulip and an Irish vampire named Cassidy. The story is told in the manner of a modern Western, complete with an unstoppable cowboy assassin and the ghost of John Wayne.

Besides an essential weirdness, *Buffy* and *Preacher* share some important elements and motifs. Both feature a centuries-old religious society, founded to fight for Good, that has lost whatever goodness and humanity it may have once had, and (to varying degrees) becomes the enemy. Both showcase the allure of the vampire myth and darkness, and its pull on the young. And most important, both feature vampire characters who act as a strong break with tradition: *Buffy's* Spike and *Preacher's* Cassidy. And while Ennis' and Dillon's characterization of the issues is different on many levels from Whedon's, both attempt to wrench a living moral vision out of the institutional rot, and to find a way to distinguish Good and Evil, since it can no longer be determined simply by the color of one's hat.

The part of the corrupted institution in *Buffy* is, of course, played by the Watchers' Council. While we first encounter Giles as stuffy and English, the Watchers' Council is like Giles without his sense of humanity. Every time Buffy and company encounter the Council, it is sure to mean bad news. The first time we see their involvement take center stage comes on Buffy's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in the episode "Helpless" (3.12). We witness a traditional rite of passage, in which the Slayer is stripped of her powers and locked up with a vampire. Giles, who cares deeply for Buffy (something Watchers are not supposed to do), calls it "an archaic exercise in cruelty." When challenged, Quentin Travers (the head of the Watchers' Council) replies "Cruciamantum is not easy...for Slayer or Watcher. But it's been done this way for a dozen centuries. Whenever a Slayer turns eighteen. It's a time-honored rite of passage." For him, the centuries of tradition far outweigh what Buffy goes through when she loses her powers without knowing why, not

to mention the very serious risk of her death. This is authority in its most monstrous form: when something is done in blind adherence to tradition. Quentin even believes that he is doing the right thing. He later tells Buffy, "we're not in the business of fair, Miss Summers. We're fighting a war." And, of course, war justifies everything. Because whatever we do is in the service of Good. We do not see the Council acting as an entity again until season 5's "Checkpoint" (5.12), when Quentin Travers uses his status to make Buffy jump through various hoops until she pushes back. In a sense, her refusal to follow the Council's orders can be read as a statement about institutions: they are there to serve her (the Slayer), not the other way around. They only have power over her if *she* allows it to be so. When she says this, Travers acquiesces and gives Buffy the information they have on Glory (that season's "Big Bad").

While the Watchers' Council has clearly lost any sense of empathy or humanity (if it ever had any; as we will see, their heartless ways go back a long time), their outlook is positively rosy compared to the secret society of "The Grail" in *Preacher*. The society, dating back to the first century AD, is unspeakably powerful (as secret societies always seem to be). They purport to guard the flesh-and-blood descendants of Jesus Christ, and have guarded the bloodline for over 1900 years. Further, they planned (the series started in 1995) to create, trigger, and manage Armageddon in 2000, and to install Christ's descendant as the God-King of the world. In *Preacher*, these were the ones who cause history to unfold as it does, and needless to say, the hands guiding this destiny are soaked in blood. The Grail represents religious and political authority combined at their worst and most ruthless; anyone who opposed them is killed, usually rather horribly. The worst of the group is Herr Starr, the group's second in command (who actually plans to subvert the group's Armageddon plan). Once, Starr relates his role in an anti-terrorist unit during an attack where a young girl was killed: "I was looking at the face of chaos. A reminder that the world lacks order. That uncertainty can reach out and smash us at any time. So long as that continues to be true, fixating on a single death is pointless. I am at war. I have been all my life. *And I would kill a million little girls to win*" (War in the Sun 53, italics mine). To illustrate his methods, once he is ordered to kill a rogue Grail operative who has been committed to a mental hospital, without arousing suspicion. So he blows up the whole hospital, explaining that since over 200 people were killed in the explosion,

anyone investigating would have to sort through over 200 motives. When asked about the loss of innocent life, he answers, "How many children died at Sodom and Gomorrah?" (War in the Sun 32). Besides showcasing Starr's utter ruthlessness in service of his quest, this incident also says something about the nature of power: "reasonable" authority has always done things this way; God (often our institutional model) used to do things like this *all the time*. And he's right. Just as in *Buffy*, the authority representing the highest good in *Preacher* has become utterly corrupt. And, in the end, both are destroyed: the Watchers' Council by agents of the First Evil, and the Grail by Starr's increasing madness and Jesse Custer's opposition.

And if good and evil cannot just be differentiated by listening to institutions, often the matter is not so clear to us, either. The Dark Side can be quite alluring and, let's face it, sexy as hell. While the vampire mythos has often had a certain melancholy appeal (and has certainly been highly sexualized since Bram Stoker wrote *Dracula*), since Anne Rice started writing about vampires, they've become quite romanticized. A large part of the "Goth" subculture is based around these beautiful creatures of the night. And both *Buffy* and *Preacher* feature vampire-worship cults, and show both the ridiculous and tragic sides of this fixation.

The *Buffy* vampire cult call themselves "The Sunset Club" in the episode "Lie to Me" (2.7). Although the members are actually being set up by their leader Ford (an old friend and classmate of Buffy's), they believe they are going to be turned into vampires – "blessed" – and made into one of "the Lonely Ones." One member, calling herself "Chanterelle" (and who we see later on *Buffy* as "Lily" and on *Angel* as "Anne") says that "they who walk the night are not interested in harming anyone. They are creatures above us. Exalted!" This romanticized version is, of course, 180° from the truth about vampires, who are (in this universe at least) soulless monsters. According to the Sunset Club, vampires are actually a higher form of being, not an abomination. In *Preacher*, a similar role is played by a group calling themselves "Les Enfants du Sang" (French for "Children of the Blood"). Their worship is actually encouraged by a local vampire named Eccarius, mostly because it strokes his ego, and provides him with the occasional meal. They dress

in black, drink each other's blood, write terrible poetry, and beg Eccarius to make him one of them.

Both Whedon and Ennis have some fun at the groups' expense. Angel talks about how they have no idea how vampires dress (as someone wearing the exact same thing walks by) or act. He calls them "children making up bedtime stories of friendly vampires to comfort themselves in the dark." However, the comedy quickly turns to violence, as the group is essentially fodder for Spike's gang – if not for Buffy's intervention, they would have all died. In *Preacher*, Cassidy, upon discovering the group, calls them "wanker central" and "a pack of poncey gothic rich-kid wannabees" (Dixie Fried 24-5). Garth Ennis has even more fun at their expense; Cassidy beats a few of them up (including an awful poet, whose gets his poem shoved down his throat), and later he and Eccarius moon them. But again, it does not end well for Les Enfants. Eccarius kills one of them, prompting Cassidy to kill him. Years later, when Cassidy returns with Jesse and Tulip, Les Enfants seek revenge by engaging them in a gunfight, and every one of them is killed. While in *Buffy*, we are led to have some sympathy for the misguided teen-agers, in *Preacher* they are merely fodder for mocking and violence. Which is pretty much how Ennis treats his characters. But the appeal of the Darkness, sometimes subtle, sometimes overwhelming, is always there.

In addition to this, both series feature the *literal* mixing of Good and Evil. In *Preacher*, the plot of the entire series is instigated with the creation and birth of Genesis: the half-angel, half-demon. Early on, Jesse describes it as "something never happened before – a mix of demon and angel, a new idea" (Gone to Texas 97). Genesis is unprecedented, and from the point of view of the angels, was *not* supposed to happen, as Jesse confronts an angel: "scared of a new idea, huh? Just as strong as His old black-and-white bullshit..." (Gone to Texas 115). And it is powerful indeed, as strong as God Almighty. Although we do not see it again until the end (as it remains bonded to Jesse's soul), Genesis drives the whole story. Its birth was the impetus for God to abandon heaven, because of its power. And through Genesis, Jesse has access to all the secrets of heaven (and it turns out God has been up to some pretty terrible things). It is this knowledge that sets him on his quest. Then there is the power it gives him, known as

"The Word." Jesse can literally command anyone to do anything, and they cannot stop themselves from doing it. His power literally comes from this mixture of good and evil.

As it happens, the same is true for the Slayer. We first see hints of this when Buffy encounters Dracula (episode 5.1), and he tells her that her power comes from darkness. Later, we find that this is literally true. In a vision, Buffy sees how the "Shadow-Men" (forerunners of the Watchers' Council) created the First Slayer: by chaining a girl to the ground and leaving her to be raped by demons. Because of the trauma (we never learn exactly how), the girl gains a measure of their power. This is the strength of the Slayer, which is passed from generation to generation. Thus, Buffy's power comes from a mixing of good and evil.

Beyond a tangible example of "fighting fire with fire," this means that Buffy (and the Slayers in general), long thought of as the agent of Good, in fact embodies this mixture of light and darkness. From a perspective of morality, this is more of what we have seen all along: the blurring of the boundaries, that in the modern world, the two sides are not so easy to distinguish (if they ever truly were). However, there is deeper, more symbolic meaning -- in any system of opposites: Good and Evil, Order and Chaos, Creation and Destruction, Life and Death, Male and Female -- the two elements cannot exist completely apart from each other. Cold and sterile Order is as lifeless as harsh and terrible Chaos -- only in the boundary between them can life exist. Male and Female require each other to create life, and Life and Death are each meaningless without the other. Most alchemical symbolism and Eastern philosophy centers on the mingling and merging, the reconciliation of these opposites. If Good and Evil are mixed in the modern world (or in *Preacher* and *Buffy*), it is probably because they have *always* been that way. Put another way, Creation is often considered the Good to Destruction's Evil, but cancer, when you get down to it, is essentially uncontrolled creation. Many psychologists, especially Jungians, spend a lot of time trying to get people to accept the "dark" sides of themselves as well as the light. And much of the danger that comes from the rotting of supposedly "good" institutions like the Watchers' Council can be traced back to their identifying (publicly and privately) solely with the "Good" side. Life in any era must contain both.

The most striking similarities between these fictional universes, however, lie between the two modern vampire protagonists, *Buffy's* Spike and *Preacher's* Cassidy. When Spike makes his appearance in "School Hard" (episode 2.3), he says "a little less ritual and a little more fun." This would be a good description of Cassidy as well. While the two series' treatment of vampirism is markedly different (in *Preacher* it is a sideline from the main plot, while in *Buffy*, it's pretty central), the Irish Cassidy and the English Spike share an attitude: Cassidy prefers beer to blood, and thinks the whole tortured, melodramatic Anne Rice thing to be ridiculous. He is disgusted with Les Enfants du Sang, and with the vampire Eccarius for encouraging them. When Eccarius says, "you are like me, a lord of nightfall, piercing veins and drinking crimson, walking in the shadows of the mortal world...They fear us, and banish us to the blackness of their nightmares – yet there we flourish, and grow strong...for what are we, but the evil in their own hearts? We are a dark mirror to them, reflecting back their self-doubt and self-loathing" (Dixie Fried 13). Cassidy responds, "Aw, fuck me...! Yeh're a wanker, aren't yeh?" Spike enters his story by interrupting a story about the crucifixion – tracing his background instead to Woodstock ("School Hard"). (Cassidy has a Woodstock story as well.)

In contrast to what we've become used to as the self-loathing, tortured vampire, Spike and Cassidy heartily enjoy their lives. When Angelus plans to destroy the world at the end of season 2 ("Becoming, Part II", episode 2.22), Spike makes a deal with Buffy to stop him. He explains, "We like to talk big. Vampires do. 'I'm going to destroy the world.' That's just tough guy talk. Strutting around with your friends over a pint of blood. The truth is, I like this world. You've got...dog racing. Manchester United. And you've got people – billions of people walking around like Happy Meals with legs. It's all right here." Cassidy, for his part, explains to Eccarius, "Ah, Jaysis. Yeh know...when I think of the stuff I've got up to in me time – an' yeh should fuckin' see some of it, I'm tellin' yeh – it just makes me think how lucky we are bein' like this, yeh know? We've the whole wide world out there waitin' for us, an' we've forever to make the most've it. An' that's the thing, mate: enjoyin' life. Not livin' death, or anythin' stupid like that. An' sure what've we got to fear except the sun?" (Dixie Fried 36).

Beyond this, we learn over time that the rock 'n roll exterior (Spike seems to take after Billy Idol, while Cassidy is patterned after the Pogues' Shane Macgowan) is merely

a front. Spike, we learn, started life as William the Bloody, named for his "bloody awful poetry" ("Fool for Love," episode 5.7), and only becomes a vampire after a heart-breaking rejection at the hands of Cecily. Cassidy was born Proinsias Cassidy in Ireland in 1900 (Proud Americans 229). Besides a change from a really lame name to an incredibly cool one, the characters share an early romanticism. Cassidy unquestioningly buys into the rhetoric of a free Ireland and fights in the Easter Rebellion of 1916. He is angry when his brother drags him away from the fighting and his chance to "stay here an' die like Irishmen" (Proud Americans 188). And while this past is for the most part buried, the young nancy-boy romantic re-emerges in both characters. Both fall madly in love with the female protagonists (Spike with Buffy and Cassidy with Jesse's girlfriend Tulip), and make a royal mess of things. And both sacrifice themselves valiantly to save the others (although in both cases the sacrifice is nullified – Spike's by the machinations of Lindsay McDonald, and Cassidy's by a deal he makes with God beforehand). In their bearing, manner, and actions, both characters are truly modern vampires. They show that the past only has a hold over us if we let it, and once we shake it off, we are free to do whatever we want (well, not really, but you get the point). They both realize that the inherited tradition of how vampires are supposed to be is pretty silly when you get down to it, and so make a new way and life for themselves.

Much of the common vision between *Buffy* and *Preacher* lies in their attempts to find a new path suitable for the world that we find ourselves in today, where black and white are not as clear-cut as we have been led to believe. There are several crucial differences in how Ennis and Whedon handle these issues: *Buffy* tries to integrate a wide range of beliefs, and seems to remain fairly reverent towards them. *Preacher* is rooted firmly in the world according to Fundamentalist Christians – of a vengeful, judgmental Old Testament God. And Ennis goes out of his way to be as irreverent and sacrilegious as possible. Vampires are more an afterthought in *Preacher*, while they form the heart of *Buffy*. Finally, while *Buffy* ends with the team taking down the ultimate Big Bad, the First Evil ("Chosen," episode 7.22), *Preacher* ends when they destroy The Lord. God. The Alpha and the Omega and the Bright Morning Star. As the ultimate case of authority gone bad, God goes down like the villain in any Western must.

In a world where authority (like the Watchers' Council or the Grail) has become corrupted, and even monstrous, we must struggle to find our own way and a moral vision to live with. Light and dark are not found in total opposition, but mixed in the world, and in people (as in Genesis and the line of Slayers), and both possess a powerful appeal (as in Les Enfants and the Sunset Club). People cannot be categorized as Good or Evil simply by their uniforms, but this does not mean we can ignore the issue altogether. Any discussion of changing morality is likely to arouse cries of "moral relativism" from the self-appointed guardians of our morals (who, incidentally, usually represent a corrupted and decaying authority). The argument is that if we lose the inflexible, set-in-stone laws we received thousands of years ago, then it becomes a case of "anything goes." "Go ahead and kill whoever you want. Steal anything. Molest kids. There's no right or wrong, so it's all good." These people miss the point. The questions of morality have not disappeared, just gotten a hell of a lot more complicated. In *Preacher* hero Jesse Custer (who we have not had time to discuss here), and in Buffy and (perhaps even more so) Angel, we have characters who are supremely concerned, even obsessed, with doing the right thing. *Preacher* and the Buffyverse share at their heart a sense of right and wrong stronger than just about any other popular culture works I have seen in a long time. But as Ben Kingsley's character says in the film *The Confession*, "Doing the right thing is easy. Knowing what is the right thing to do is the hard part." In this respect, *Buffy* and *Preacher* share a common vision, put simply: in a world where everything has become blurred and complicated, how do we make our way through our lives? The answer, as we have seen, takes a long time to explain.

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