

“What if I’m still there? What if I never left that clinic?”:

Faërian Drama in *Buffy*’s “Normal Again”

Janet Brennan Croft

“Normal Again” (6.17) is one of the most studied and written-about episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). Emotionally wrenching in its depiction of mental illness and institutionalization, the deliberately ambiguous ending leaves the audience disoriented and calls the internal reality of the entire series up to that point into question. Initially inspired by Marquette University’s possession of the J.R.R. Tolkien papers, this presentation from the 2017 “Buffy at 20” conference at Marquette posits that applying several theoretical concepts from J.R.R. Tolkien’s influential lecture “On Fairy-stories” (1939) to this episode can help to clarify both what Buffy experiences and how the episode may best be understood by the viewer; specifically, this essay will use Tolkien’s term “Faërian drama,” and his definitions of the functions of the fairy tale, as tools to unpack “Normal Again.” While *Buffy* is more often thought of as a whole as belonging to the genre of horror, it may quite often be more profitably considered as fairy tale or mythopoeic fantasy—and this episode in particular straddles the genres. Viewed one way, it fits John Clute’s pattern (elaborated in “Fantastika in the World Storm”) for the horror story: the realization of a wrongness in the world, the thickening of the fog around the hero, revelation of the horrible

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truth, and aftermath of fatalistic acceptance (27-28). Viewed the other way around, it better fits Clute's paradigm for fantasy: the realization of a wrongness, a thinning into cacophony and useless action, recognition of the solution or key to the problem, and return to a renewed world (26). Here the difference between horror and fantasy hinges on perspective—to use Tolkien's phrase, on whether we view Buffy's escape from "reality" in this episode as the "Escape of the Prisoner, [or] the Flight of the Deserter" ("On Fairy-stories" [OFS] 69).

Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, in their expanded edition of the text, call "On Fairy-stories" "Tolkien's defining study of and the centre-point in his thinking about the genre as well as being the theoretical basis for his fiction" (9). In context, it was delivered shortly after the publication of *The Hobbit* and as he began work on *The Lord of the Rings*, so the latter can be viewed as "the practical application and demonstration of the principles" set forth in the lecture (15), which he continued to revise and polish over the next several years until its publication in 1945, with republication including some minor revisions in 1964.

The essay is long, fascinating, and sometimes a bit rambling, but taken as a whole, it sets forth a comprehensive theory of fantasy. Tolkien works towards a definition of what a fairy-story is and what it is not, and how fairy tales and fantasy are related to myth, to children's literature, and to other genres. At the conclusion, Tolkien sets out what he believes are the functions of the fairy-story as he has defined it. These stories offer to the reader:

- Fantasy—the chance to enter into a secondary world that is the result of an author's exercise of imagination and the sub-creative faculty;
- Recovery—the opportunity to regain a clear view of the world through a change and renewal of perspective;
- Escape—an escape from the mundane world's focus on the unimportant and superficial; as Tolkien is careful to distinguish it, this is the "Escape of the Prisoner, not the Flight of the Deserter" (69); and

- Consolation—the satisfaction of the happy ending. At its most profound, the happy ending results in the sense of
- Eucatastrophe—the feeling of the “sudden joyous ‘turn’” in a story, when all feels at its most hopeless; the “sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur” (OFS 75)

These functions for the reader align relatively neatly with Clute’s outline of the functions for the character in the story itself; both take a similar journey.

The other concept from the lecture we need to examine before we return to *Buffy* is “Faërian Drama.” In one of the segments that strays a bit from the main purpose, Tolkien makes a curious claim. In the section on Fantasy, he says:

Now “Faërian Drama”—those plays which according to abundant records the elves have often presented to men—can produce Fantasy with a realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism. As a result their usual effect (upon a man) is to go beyond Secondary Belief. If you are present at a Faërian drama you yourself are, or think that you are, bodily inside its Secondary World [...]. The experience may be very similar to Dreaming and has (it would seem) sometimes (by men) been confounded with it. But in Faërian drama you are in a dream that some other mind is weaving, and the knowledge of that alarming fact may slip from your grasp. To experience directly a Secondary World: the potion is too strong, and you give to it Primary Belief, however marvellous the events. [...] Art is the human process that produces by the way (it is not its only or ultimate object) Secondary Belief. Art of the same sort, if more skilled and effortless, the elves can also use, or so the reports seem to show; but the more potent and specially elvish craft I will, for lack of a less debatable word, call Enchantment. Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside [...]. (OFS 63-64)

As I have remarked in one of my other papers about Faërian Drama, “This is all well and good, but as Flieger and Anderson point out in their commentary, ‘no definition of what the faërian [drama] consists of is given [and] no examples of such “plays” or “abundant records” are given” either. I concluded that “Tolkien’s description actually ‘does little to clarify the concept’ or show how the experience of Faërian drama truly differs from an ordinary dream or vision” (Croft, “Tolkien’s Faërian Drama” 32). I have been attempting to work out exactly what Tolkien meant by “Faërian Drama,” and where we could find examples of these “abundant records” Tolkien speaks of in his sources and see how he used them in his own works. I traced some ideas, for example, to medieval dream visions like *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or more modern sources like *A Christmas Carol* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I have also looked at recent works where I could fruitfully apply this definition and theory; for example, the movie *Groundhog Day* (1993) and the American TV show *Life on Mars* (2008) (Croft, “Faerian Drama, Without the Fairies”).¹

So far, this is the structure I have uncovered by looking at examples of Faërian drama in Tolkien’s work and at other things that act like Faërian drama, and what I plan to use when we turn to “Normal Again” in the next section:

1. The Goal: The artistic goal of Faërian drama, like that of the fairy tale itself, is to awaken in the participant an openness to Fantasy, Escape, Recovery, Consolation, and the possibility of Eucatastrophe. The one essential goal within the experience is Recovery, the “regaining of a clear view” (OFS 67), which makes the participant receptive to the rest, which he or she may encounter later after waking if not within the experience itself. There is a specific moral teaching purpose designed for the chosen participant.
2. The Witness/Participant: The participant must be in a liminal and receptive state: he or she must be troubled by something, or in need of intervention, or specifically chosen to bring back the witness of Faery to benefit a larger group [like Smith in

Smith of Wootton Major]. His or her resistance to the experience is typically broken down by “softening” events leading up to it. The participant may, consciously or unconsciously, deliberately seek out the experience.

3. The Techniques: The goal is achieved through a variety of artistic effects, the most basic of which is that the participant must believe fully in the reality of the experience while within it. The dreamer is always an acting character in the drama. A dramaturge or guide may or may not be present. There is likely to be a sense that the dreamer has entered a pre-existing world, which will continue to exist after he or she leaves, and from which he or she could be expelled without notice.
4. The Consequences: The experience of faërian drama cannot be dismissed as a mere dream; upon awakening, the participant must retain a sense that the events were real and “other,” with lasting consequences and moral effects, and not solely creations of his or her dreaming mind. The experience must also have addressed something that troubled or disturbed the dreamer. The moral purpose of the experience may or may not be revealed to the participant at the time; it may become clear only on awakening or after long reflection. (Croft, “Tolkien’s Faërian Drama” 43-44, slightly edited)

Additionally, it should be clear that the participant in Faërian drama is *not* in Purgatory. There must be a “return” phase. While there is a purgatorial element to many of the examples, it is essential that the participant, like Scrooge after his visitation by the spirits, return to the primary world “with the boon of a changed perspective” and the ability to take action and amend his or her actual physical life, spiritual life, and relationships (Croft, “Faërian Drama, Without the Fairies”).

“Normal Again”: The Episode

So now let us turn to Faërian Drama in the Buffyverse, particularly in the episode “Normal Again.” There are a great many other examples that could be used, some of them far more straightforward than what takes place in “Normal Again,” but this episode is particularly suitable because of its complexity and its place in the arc of the season. Some of these other possible Faërian episodes include “The Wish” (3.9), which takes Cordelia into a world where Buffy never came to Sunnydale; “The Replacement” (5.3), where Xander sees what his life might be like without his insecurities; “Hell’s Bells” (6.16), in which Xander is granted a distorted vision of his future life with Anya that causes him to leave her at the altar, and Anya’s opposing vision of marital bliss in “Selfless” (7.5); and “Superstar,” (4.17) in which the entire world enters into Jonathan’s fantasy, down to the episode’s opening credits. “Birthday” (*Angel* 3.11), an *Angel* (1999-2004) episode which aired two months before “Normal Again,” is particularly interesting as a similar exploration of the temptation to reject one’s responsibilities and path (see Richardson and Rabb 55-62); Cordelia is offered the opportunity to reset her life and become the star of her own TV show rather than continue to receive the life-threatening visions that guide the work of Angel Investigations.

“Normal Again,” as the 17th episode of Season 6, falls towards the end of that season’s arc. At the beginning of the episode, Buffy is trying to track down the lair of Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew, the trio of nerds who have been making her life miserable all season. They call up a demon who injects her arm with a poison. Immediately she finds herself in a room in an insane asylum, as two orderlies try to control her, injecting a sedative into the same spot. Throughout the episode she flashes back and forth between Sunnydale and the asylum with no warning, though usually at times of stress (Stevenson 29). In the asylum world, her mother Joyce (who died in the previous season in Sunnydale) and father Hank (who separated from her mother before the series even began) work with her doctor to try to persuade Buffy that Sunnydale is a fantasy and she needs to break all ties with it to return to sanity.

During one of her periods in Sunnydale, Buffy reveals to Willow that she did spend time in an institution in what would have been the unnarrativized period between the original movie and the TV series, before Giles became her Watcher. This was in fact later expanded upon in a comic book series titled *Slayer, Interrupted*, published some months after “Normal Again” aired (Lobdell et al.); similarly, the events of *Slayer, Interrupted* occur during a moment of intense doubt about her calling and show the dangers of rejecting her destiny.² Not mentioned in “Normal Again” is the fact that Buffy was also threatened with the exposure of her “psychological delusions” and incarceration in a mental hospital by her mother’s boyfriend Ted, after the android read her diary (“Ted” 2.11; see Richardson and Rabb 36 for further discussion of this incident). As with the first period when Buffy was institutionalized, she is forced into silencing her voice and truth (see Peeling and Scanlon paragraph 8); “Normal Again” intensifies the consequences of remaining silent even further.

The other Scoobies capture the demon in an attempt to harvest the poison and distill an antidote for Buffy. But after a fight with Spike about revealing their relationship, in which he has some harsh things to say about her need to feel like a martyr, she throws the antidote away. Instead of waking her fighting spirit, his speech backfires and tips Buffy’s balance in favor of the asylum. Trying to take the advice of the doctor to make it as easy on herself as possible, she sets her friends up to be killed by the demon as a way to free herself of them without having their blood on her hands. In the end, though, she makes a choice to stay in Sunnydale-world and save them. In the final scene, we see Buffy’s parents in the asylum timeline, grieving as the doctor tells them Buffy is now lost to them and has fully retreated into her dreamworld—suggestively giving the asylum reality ontological priority over the normal Buffyverse.

Seen on its own, the episode can be read in two distinct ways. For asylum-patient Buffy, Sunnydale is the Faërian drama. If we build on a hint from what she tells Willow in Sunnydale-world, this Buffy was likely placed in the asylum by her parents because she claimed to be seeing vampires, and the Sunnydale world was a drama constructed in her mind to make sense of it all. This is an entirely plausible hypothesis. Flor and

Knies list a number of ways in which Buffy's Sunnydale life resembles "schizophrenic delusions": "delusions of grandeur" manifesting in a sense of special destiny, "religious delusion" in the mash-up of disparate mythological elements undergirding the Slayer mythos, "delusion of descent" from a long line of Slayers, "delusions of persecution" by secret societies and councils, "delusions of manipulation" by demon possession and chip implantation. Moreover, there are confusions between states of life and death, mental and physical fragmentation of characters, porous borders between reality and the fantastic, and (in Flor and Kneis's Freudian interpretation) disruptions of the oedipal triangle (69-70). Buffy's task is to learn from this "psychotic narration" (68) to cope with reality, to reach some conclusion to the Hellmouth story and return to real life with her sanity intact—a task at which she fails, electing instead to stay in Faërie, where she feels her life has meaning, and not return.

Seen the other way around, for Sunnydale-Buffy, the *asylum* world is the Faërian drama. In *this* drama, she is faced with the parents she lost to death and divorce and the temptation to return to a safe and protected childhood with them. Her task is to reject this infantilizing fantasy and make a clear choice to accept the Hellmouth and her calling there—a task at which she succeeds, electing to stand by her friends, commit to being the Slayer, and claim authority over her own story (Peeling and Scanlon paragraph 11). The elements of real-world schizophrenic delusion as listed by Flor and Kneis, turned on their heads on the Hellmouth, become the healing and heroic elements of the fairy tale as described by Tolkien: Fantasy, Recovery, Escape, Consolation, and the possibility of Eucatastrophe.

At the climactic, eucatastrophic moment, asylum-world Joyce tells the struggling girl "You've got . . . a world of strength in your heart. I know you do. You just have to find it again. Believe in yourself." And Buffy chooses to believe in her Slayer-self and tells her mother "You're right. Thank you. Good-bye" (00:39:28-40:10). Len Geller uses the terms "gift" and "life-transforming" and "experience of grace" to describe this moment (paragraph 13); Stevenson says "Buffy has learned the power of grace and so she extends it to others" (224). Both echo the terminology Tolkien uses to define eucatastrophe.

This episode is very carefully written, directed, and produced so

that it can be interpreted either way—and in fact comes down a bit stronger on the side of the “she was in the asylum all along” interpretation. When we, the audience, read or view a work containing an example of Faërian drama, we add a metafictional layer to the story: we are (or become) aware that the actor or character is experiencing the Faërian drama, and part of our engagement as spectators rests in the tense anticipation of whether the character will realize she is in a Faërian drama or not, and if so, when. Many other TV series include episodes using the “your universe is a psychotic fiction in your own head” trope. These stories also tend to end with the hero “reinvigorated, resuming the good fight and resisting the temptation of a normal life” (Flor and Kneis 71). Christine Mains analyzes this trope in detail across a number of works, noting parallel constructions and similar choices faced by the characters: the constrained space, the wise and paternal doctor, the choice between the sensible, plausible, restful asylum world and the fantastic, demanding storyworld. The situation faced by young Charlotte Abigail Lux in the *Doctor Who* episodes “Silence in the Library” and “Forest of the Dead” (4.8, 4.9), for example, features Doctor Moon, a character very similar in appearance and manner to Buffy’s doctor. “Normal Again” and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*’s “Far Beyond the Stars” (6.13) are two rare examples of this story-arc ending ambiguously for the viewer.

This is also one of many Whedonverse episodes in which a character is doubled or split in some fashion, a technique through which our conception of a character is “radically subverted” (Allrath 137) and we become unsure of what we think we know about them. Doubling or splitting might occur by means of a spell, an incursion from a parallel universe, the construction of a robot sex-toy double, two characters sharing the same body, possession or reanimation by a demon, vampiric siring, and so on, and can be playful or traumatic. Outside the Buffyverse, Whedon plays with this very deliberately in *Dollhouse* (2009–2010) with its personality wiping and imprinting technology. In this case the mechanism of the doubling may be unclear but its effects on both Buffy and the viewer are emphatic: as we watch the intertwined stories tangle together, we experience along with Buffy a “destabilization of the fictional reality of the Buffy-verse” (Allrath 147) and we question our

certainties in parallel with her.

Normal Again: The Context

“Normal Again” makes greater sense within the arc of the season. “Once More with Feeling” (6.7) may seem like the big splashy fulcrum of Season 6, but many critics have observed that the quieter turning point in “Normal Again” is even more important.³ The themes and threads of the season are drawing together. The arc begins with Buffy brought back to life through Willow’s magic, without her consent (Peeling and Scanlon paragraph 6), and her difficulties in getting reoriented to the world of the living (“Bargaining” 6.1 & 6.2). The season’s “Big Bad” was just as disorienting as this rebirth—were we supposed to take The Trio, three socially inept geeks, seriously as a threat, when last season’s villain, Glory, was an actual God? And yet, as Peeling and Scanlon point out, their petty plots “appropriate [Buffy’s] authority [over herself] again and again” (paragraph 7). Likewise, a multitude of mundane issues weigh Buffy down—the entire season seems to be an exercise in “how miserable can we make Buffy’s life?”

One thread that offers us a clue to understanding “Normal Again” as the sort of Faërian drama that presents a character with a choice and turning point is the way Buffy keeps being offered ways to escape the overwhelmingly messy and entropic real world into which she has been revived. As she sings in “Once More With Feeling,” since being called back from heaven, she feels a “strange estrangement” (0:01:51) from her life and her friends, while in heaven there was “no pain, no fear, no doubt” (0:42:46-51). As she confessed to Spike earlier in “After Life” (6.3), “I was warm ... and I was loved ... and I was finished” (0:40:00-07). Is it any wonder that she is tempted time and time again to escape? For example, to lose herself in sex with Spike in “Smashed” (6.9) and reject that connection in later episodes; then to briefly be tempted by the false hope of getting back together with Riley in “As You Were” (6.15)? To let Giles take on all her responsibilities for Dawn in “All the Way” (6.6), convincing him he must leave her if she is to mature as a person? To pin all her hopes on Xander and Anya’s

wedding only to have it come crashing down in “Hell’s Bells”? To blame being brought back ‘wrong’ for her troubles and try to give herself up to the police in “Dead Things” (6.13)? To find being invisible a vast relief in “Gone” (6.11) and react to the possibility she might die with a simple, affectless “Wow” (0:33:40)? Anything to avoid the fact that “The hardest thing in this world... is to live in it” (“The Gift” 5.22, 0:42:30-33 and “Once More, with Feeling” 6.7, 0:44:39-43). “The theme of the year could be summarized as ‘life is hell’” (Flor and Kneis 68), and this episode is one of the most profound of Buffy’s “emotional nadir[s]” and “withdrawals” (Frankel 184).

There is a particularly interesting three-episode arc of temptation in “Once More, with Feeling,” “Tabula Rasa” (6.8), and “Normal Again.” In the musical, she is tempted by the opportunity to sacrifice herself to Hell—to go with Sweet as his bride, his Persephone, escaping this “glittering world” (0:40:58) where she doesn’t fit in and she dances to the tunes her friends set, by punishing herself for all the shortcomings she feels. In “Tabula Rasa,” there is a brief reincarnation, aided by the Lethe’s Bramble spell, into a fresh new earthly life where she can start over as Joan, free of her painful memories, returning to her true nature and working off her past karmic sins—a species of Purgatory, in a way. But in “Normal Again,” she faces the temptation of returning to Heaven. There is a clue in the dialogue in the asylum, where the doctor speaks of her momentary awakening “last summer” and being “pulled back in” (0:30:10-14) by her friends—that heavenly moment of normalcy with Hank and Joyce corresponds exactly with her death at the end of Season 5. Heaven, in this temptation, would be to “lay [her] arms down” and “rest at last” (as Giles sang in “Once More With Feeling,” 0:31:51-55) and be with her reunited parents, a child again with no responsibilities except to get better.

“Normal Again” and Faërian Drama

So let us apply the above definitions of the elements and purposes of Faërian drama to “Normal Again.” First, the state of the witness/participant. As has been pointed out, the entire season has been

an exercise in “How miserable can we make Buffy?” She has been “softened up” by a series of blows, in danger of sinking under all her responsibilities and losing all her friends. With her mother dead, her father absent, and her Watcher gone back to England, she is responsible for the house and her younger sister and has to drop out of college and get a job. Add to this a variety of other relationship issues: Willow’s addiction to magic and break-up with Tara, Dawn’s kleptomania and falling grades, Buffy’s ambivalence about her relationship with Spike, and Xander’s leaving Anya at the altar (as a result of his own Faërian drama experience) when their upcoming wedding was the one thing Buffy was hoping would be “my light at the end of this very long, long, nasty tunnel” (“Hell’s Bells” 6.16, 0:6:20-25). Valerie Frankel calls this particular episode a “long night of the soul” for Buffy, when she must confront her immaturity and apathy and give up her fantasy of something, anything, magically making everything all better (167-168). Underlying all this is the feeling that she came back “wrong” from a peaceful heaven. At this point, Buffy is clearly off-balance, doubting her purpose and feeling unsupported: in a liminal state, and in need of intervention. The misogynistic Trio are the last straw, a laughable yet malevolent and slippery foe.

Next let us examine the technique. It starts with the injection of the demon’s poison into her arm, but the Trio’s goal is simply to disorient and confuse the Slayer; neither the Trio nor Willow knows exactly what this poison does, nor does the demon seem to be directing or connected to her experience in any way. Her senses are certainly satisfied within the drama, and she experiences “both joy and sorrow” (OFS 27), to borrow a phrase from Tolkien. She is immersed into what seems to be a world already in progress—the flash cut technique underlines this. In fact, one of the ways to interpret what happens is that the poison is enabling jumping back and forth between parallel, equally real worlds resulting from an earlier choice or incident in Buffy’s life (Ouellette 188). The choice to return to Sunnydale can be seen as negating, collapsing, or eliminating the other reality (see also Richardson and Rabb 61, Rose paragraph 17, Halfyard 49-50).

There is indeed the feeling of danger, that if “the gates should be shut and the keys be lost” (OFS 27), to quote Tolkien again, she would

be locked in forever—or locked out, depending on her changing perspective. Given Joss Whedon's atheism, we can assume that this is *not* a drama specifically designed for Buffy by some supernatural entity guiding her life—but we do not know for sure, because Cordelia definitely feels she is being guided by a higher power in *Angel* under similar circumstances. Most likely it draws on what is already in existence in Buffy's psyche: her feelings of disconnection from the world and her memories of the asylum drive the story her subconscious creates.

There are a number of different goals for us to consider, depending on what perspective we take. The goal of the Trio is basically to prove their manhood by dominating Buffy, to be her “arch-nemesis ... ses” (“Gone” 6.11, 0:39:18-20). The goal of the Doctor in the asylum is to “cure” Buffy and reunite her with her parents. At the meta-level, the goal of the writers is to create a compelling story that drives forward the themes and action of the season and engages the audience. But the goal of the creator of the Faërian drama, whatever that creator might be, is to get Buffy back on her path: to help her to regain a clear view of her commitment to her role as Slayer and to her friends, by finding some sort of closure to her grief at her loss of heaven, represented here by her overwhelming desire for parents who are alive and together and the temptation to let it all go and be taken care of again.

And finally, what are the consequences for Buffy? Is this situation a pivotal juncture after which nothing remains the same? None of her chances to escape earlier in the season were rejected unequivocally by her own clear choice; “set on this earth like a bubble” (“After Life” 6.3, 0:34:04-06), she was blown one way or another by the breeze. Like Frodo in the Seat of Seeing on Amon Hen, in the asylum she is balanced on the knife edge between “Never, never” and “Verily I come, I come to you” (*The Lord of the Rings* II.10.401). Here she deliberately and against a great temptation *chooses* Sunnydale and Slayerdom and her friends.

Len Geller lays her choices out as a version of Pascal's Wager, a choice that must be made with insufficient information:

- (a) If she chooses the normal world and the Sunnydale world is a delusion, she will regain her sanity, be reunited with her parents, and return to a much safer world free of vampires and

demons.

- (b) If she chooses the normal world and the Sunnydale world is real, she will only think she has regained her sanity and will be responsible for the deaths of her sister and best friends.
- (c) If she chooses the Sunnydale world and it is a delusion, she will not regain her sanity or be reunited with her parents.
- (d) If she chooses the Sunnydale world and it is real, she will reclaim her identity as the Slayer and avert the deaths of her sister and best friends. (Geller paragraph 10)

Buffy's choice is the one with the highest risk but potentially the highest reward and results in (d), to the best of her knowledge—but we as the audience are presented with endings (c) and (d) given equal weight. The writers, in their commentary, suggest that this ought to have been the final episode of the season, leaving the viewers in “ontological limbo” (Pateman 30). But this would have left Buffy in a purgatorial situation and would have eliminated the “heroic return with a boon” aspects of the episode entirely. From Buffy's perspective, she returns with the boon of certainty in her destiny and saves her friends; as Janet Halfyard observes, in the asylum scenario she is as passive as Eurydice, kidnapped into Hell and awaiting rescue, but here “Eurydice becomes the hero” and makes the decision to “recross the threshold” and “be the hero again” (49) herself.

Buffy does not examine the incident too closely once it is over, but also she does not ignore it or treat it as “just a dream”—and *not* obsessing over it is an important reaction to the drama. Her utter rejection of the asylum-reality *was* the goal, and by going on as if nothing really happened, she affirms her choice. In “Entropy” (6.18), the next episode, she jokes about trying to kill her friends, but in “Seeing Red” (6.19) she opens up and tells Xander “You don't know how hard it's been...just being here” (0:17:29-33). Dark Willow tries to use the experience against her in “Two to Go” (6.21):

- Buffy: Willow, if you let this control you then the world goes away. And all of us with it. There's so much to live for. (forcefully) Will, there's too much-
- Willow: (scoffs) Oh, please! This is your pitch? Buffy, you hate it here as much as I do. I'm just more honest about it.
- Buffy: That's not true.
- Willow: You're trying to sell me on the world? The one where you lie to your friends when you're not trying to kill them? And you screw a vampire just to feel? And insane asylums are the comfy alternative? This world? Buffy, it's me. I know you were happier when you were in the ground. The only time you were ever at peace in your whole life is when you were dead. (0:30:22-31:06)

But Buffy is once again sure of herself as the Slayer. And she has taken the lesson fully to heart when she comforts Dawn in "Grave," the final episode of the season (6.22):

- Dawn: I ... I think it's over, Buffy. The world's still here. (Buffy bursts into tears, not looking at Dawn.) (sarcastic) Sorry to disappoint y- Wait, is ... is that happy crying?
- Buffy: Yes, dummy. You think I wanted the world to end?
- Dawn: I don't know. (uncertainly) Didn't you?
- Buffy: Dawn ... I'm so sorry.
- Dawn: It's okay, Buffy. It's okay.
- Buffy: No. It hasn't been. It hasn't been okay. [...] Things have really sucked lately, but it's all gonna change. And I wanna be there when it does. I want to see my friends happy again. And I want to see you grow up. The woman you're gonna become. Because she's

gonna be beautiful. And she's going to be powerful. 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 that I want to show you. (0:36:53-38:56)

Conclusion: The Functions of “Normal Again”

So let us take this back to Tolkien one more time and look at the functions of the fantasy or fairy tale story as they work themselves out in “Normal Again.” Interestingly, to go back to the point above concerning psychotic narration, it seems the asylum vision deliberately offers an inverted version of the four functions in order to achieve its effect.

In the asylum world, every person and every thing about the setting works to try to convince Buffy that Sunnydale is the fantasy and this is the reality; while the normal fairy-tale offers an escape *into* fantasy, the purpose of the asylum within her fantasy is to get Buffy to accept it as real. In the asylum, Sunnydale is cast as the psychotic fantasy and Slayerdom is the illness from which Buffy must recover to obtain a clear view of reality, rather than the asylum-vision something she must reject in order to recover her view of real life. Accepting the asylum vision as the real world seems to be the only “escape of the prisoner” possible from her mental illness, but it would really be the “flight of the deserter,” in which Buffy would abandon her responsibilities as Slayer, sister, and friend. The consolation the vision presents is a false one, a dream of “everything sad [coming] untrue,” as Sam put it when waking up after the destruction of the One Ring (*The Lord of the Rings* VI.4.951)—but it is a dream of regression to a child-like state of dependence and passivity. The eucatastrophe of the episode is the moment where Buffy chooses her Slayer duties freely—not as a destiny she alone can and must fulfil, but as what seems to her, in that moment, to be a valid choice between two equally valid and possible realities. Richardson and Rabb put it this way: “Buffy is given the ultimate Either/Or, the ultimate existential freedom to choose either life as the Slayer or the normal life she has always craved” (55). She makes the choice to continue the fight rather than “lay down her arms” as if

Sunnydale never existed.

Buffy has no dramaturge telling her what it is all about or how to interpret what she goes through—no Marley's Ghost or Clarence the Angel to explain it all. Whedon does not make things that easy. As with the travels in Faery of the title character in Tolkien's *Smith of Wootton Major*, "No sight or event [she] encounters is explained to [her]; no secret is uncovered, no mystery revealed. Faery makes no concession to human curiosity and no allowances for human frailty" (Flieger, Afterword 60). Buffy, as always, has to figure it out on her own.

And we must too, left with that ambiguous final scene. As Flor and Kneis point out, we, the audience, are the only ones witnessing that final shot of Buffy in the asylum. But we have to ignore it so that the rest of the series makes sense. "An almost deliberate act of repression is asked from the audience here. Though we have seen it, we cannot incorporate it (or do not want to incorporate it) [...]. The audience follows Buffy's example to deliberately escape from the institution" (73-74). The issue, as Stevenson suggests and Tolkien might well agree, is "not whether *Buffy* is a fantasy story, but whether it is a fantasy story that helps us confront the harshness of life"—that gives us "strength for [our] own lives" (29, 30). Does the tempting comfort of the insane asylum or the stern call to heroism of the Buffyverse better help us, the viewer of the Faërian drama that is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, to cope with the world? Which will *we*, as viewers, reject?

"Normal Again" is a problematic episode; viewed in isolation it is confusing and ambivalent, "a permanent subversion of the text" (Geller paragraph 2). As viewers we may feel betrayed by the implication that we might have been "wasting our time watching a psychiatric delusion for the last six years" (Richardson and Rabb 55); "our vantage point outside the narrative affords us no privileged insight" (Geller paragraph 4), and our involvement with and identification with the character makes her own confusion that much more disruptive (Burr). It is unsettling precisely because we as viewers are "pathologized" right along with Buffy for "buying into [the] reality" the show depicts (Bussolini 334-335). I believe that by viewing it within the arc of the season, and with tools adapted from Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories," we can better understand its importance as a major and essential psychological and

spiritual turning point for Buffy—one that we can learn from at one remove from Faerie ourselves. But we viewers, like Buffy, must “exercise [our] own moral imaginations” (Rabb and Richardsdon 183) and make that final choice ourselves about what kind of story we are watching—and living.

Notes

¹ Richardson and Rabb note the kinship of *A Christmas Carol* with “Normal Again” and *Angel*’s “Birthday” (3.11), as well as other episodes I cite below as examples of Faërian drama in the Buffyverse (60). Hessel points out parallels with *Don Quixote* (34-35), another work which in some ways fits this pattern.

² Nancy Gobatto analyzes *Slayer, Interrupted*, which expands on what Buffy experienced during this earlier confinement (issues 56-59 of Dark Horse’s BtVS series) (124-125).

³ Flor and Kneis 68; Peeling and Scanlon paragraph 6; Rose paragraph 21.

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