

**“The Hardest Thing in This World Is to Live in It”:
Identity and Mental Health in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

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It is important to acknowledge that in many instances, the Buffyverse views mental illness through the same imperfect lens that pop culture, as a misguided whole, has customarily used. Angelica Jade Bastién points out that, generally speaking, television portrayals of mental illness in sympathetic characters are limited to depression and anxiety, and that “when [they] do introduce diagnoses beyond depression, it’s often as a tactic to define characters through danger and violence.” Although *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) refrains from diagnosing its characters, this trope nonetheless holds true; there remains a reciprocal relationship between violence and depictions of long-term, intensive psychic instability. As the show’s more overt handlings of mental illness are perhaps less realistic as potential case studies, this paper will focus on the interplay between trauma, suffering, and identity in Buffy and Willow, who appear to “straddle the line” of mental wellness at times, but whose characters are not clearly defined by any formal diagnosis, much less anything like “insanity.” Although they frequently stand in judgment of other characters, whose levels of emotional wellness are measured primarily by their homicidal impulses, Buffy and Willow each experience serious struggles with trauma and emotional health themselves. As these characters grow older and begin to face increasingly complex, adult challenges (like addiction, suicidal ideation, and general alienation from a cold world), they work to

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integrate these lived experiences with their self-understanding. Buffy interprets any impulse for companionship or peer consultation to be a sign of weakness that is in disharmony with her sense of her responsibilities, personality, and social role; her self-perception is subsumed by the context of her particular form of heroism and her subsequent tortured isolation, which work in opposition to her attempts to find emotional peace. Willow, meanwhile, desperately works to shed her understanding of herself as a sidekick and a nerd, driving her to dangerous behaviors and even causing personality fragmentation. Questions of core identity, and its breakdown, often fuel self-destructive impulses on the series, as the show's established principles of healing frequently conflict with characters' understanding of their own social roles. *Buffy* posits that healing is an ongoing process which is most effective in an informal setting defined by intimate and reliable community support, and demonstrates the value of family and friendship in successfully negotiating the boundary between duty to self and duty to the world. This analysis will thereby examine the efforts of Buffy and Willow to heal themselves in the face of incompatible, self-imposed pressures to maintain their specific identities.

Buffy

Melissa Mahoney examines the existentialist conflict between personal identity and social function in *Buffy*, noting the limitations of self-imposed adherence to social responsibility as a form of identity in itself. In her article attributing authentic decision-making in *Buffy* to a stark identification with mortality, Mahoney charges Buffy as partially accountable for the choice to exchange her desires and inclinations as a naturally gregarious and optimistic teenager for the heavy and isolating burden of being the Slayer, describing her as having “forfeited her existence in the name of responsibility” (Mahoney 3). However, the painful impossibility of this choice is also evident in the inherent mutual exclusion of her natural development against this responsibility:

Rather than manage the continuous anxiety-inducing decision-making process of choosing between herself and her responsibility toward others, she has already decided against herself... However, the series shows that it is not quite so simple. When Buffy is selfless, she does harm to herself and loses the experiences of romantic relationships and academic learning that she owes to herself as a teenage girl. When Buffy is selfish, she puts her family, friends and all of humanity in danger (3).

Viewers may identify a similar conflict between social role and social function in Willow, whose dependence on magic works as a deliberate choice to distance herself from her reputation of bookish passivity, equipping her with increased social power and greater value in world-saving efforts, at the expense of her emotional wellness and freedom of will. As Willow works actively to develop her reputation as an expert magician, she gradually loses balance and self-control. Identity works in these characters as a deliberate, fraught, and all-consuming alignment with social roles and responsibilities, in direct conflict with established tenets of emotionally healthy and natural development.

Trauma Studies allows us to explore the dynamics of trauma across a variety of disciplines. Cathy Caruth, a leading expert on trauma in literature, suggests that trauma reactions stem from the necessary deferral of an unassimilable event (4). Unable to adequately process a trauma at the time of experiencing it, we are consumed by it piecemeal on a daily basis thereafter. Caruth suggests that “for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but the passing out of it that is traumatic; that *survival itself*, in other words, *can be a crisis*” (9). Buffy, our title heroine, faces new traumas on a regular basis, working to balance undue pressure both from her supernatural obligations and from plainly vindictive human luck. Exposed to unspeakable horrors every night, her bond to protect the world requires her to engage in constant violence, and to live with the specter of her own death around every corner, while simultaneously isolating from her family and friends. She bends realistically to these pressures and is gradually shaped by her experience with a relative sense of clarity and self-awareness that does not ultimately seem to be of significant help toward making healthy

choices for healing. Her understanding of herself as the one and only person responsible for the fate of the world affects the way she responds to challenges, including the ever-increasing difficulties in even the more normal parts of daily life.

Buffy's characteristic response to traumatic experience is to withdraw into herself, push away her loved ones by treating them poorly, and silently smolder until reaching her breaking point. The cycle usually culminates in a violent outburst, after which she is finally able to accept comfort and help, and to find a new equilibrium from which to operate. She is changed incrementally by each of these experiences, becoming less hurttable but colder every time. Buffy recognizes and fears this progression, finding her durability to be at odds with her humanity: "Strength, resilience, those are all words for hardness. I'm starting to feel like being the Slayer is turning me to stone... to slay, to kill, it means being hard on the inside" ("Intervention" 5.18, 00:03:10-04:11). She attributes this hardness to something outside her natural personality—it is her Slayerness, injected into her almost like a poison, that creates this identity, which she is forced to integrate for the sake of the rest of humanity. Encounters with the First Slayer emphasize this perspective; in their first meeting within a dream, the First Slayer tells her about their shared essence: "I have no speech. No name. I live in the action of death, the blood cry, the penetrating wound...I am destruction. Absolute. Alone" ("Restless" 4.22, 00:39:00-13). Buffy protests that she is different, a part of the world, engaged in typical human activities, civilized—"I don't sleep on a bed of bones" (00:39:46-47). Still, this interaction begins to solidify an impression of herself that she has feared since the beginning of her work as Slayer: that she is defined by her connection to death, both in the perpetration of it and in the ongoing threat of it against herself. Slayer as killer, Slayer as killed, in perpetuity.

This connection is magnified later in the series, when she sacrifices herself to defeat Glory and then is involuntarily returned to life. Diving (literally) into the experience of death allows her to end the cycle and put these questions to rest; having died, she no longer needs to live inside death. Returning to life, then, and having to again manage death's constant threat, is a nearly unbearable experience. Buffy describes life as "hard, and bright, and violent. Everything I feel,

everything I touch... this is hell" ("After Life" 6.3, 04:41:43-58). She compares it to her experience of being dead, when she felt complete and finished with her work, and had a sense that everyone she loved was safe. The excruciating pressure of life contrasted with the relief of death acutely reflects Caruth's characterization of survival as a crisis for those who have experienced trauma (9).

In "Get It Done" (7.15), she learns that it is in fact a demonic essence that comprises the energy that makes a Slayer. She rejects an additional infusion of this power in favor of retaining as much of her humanity as she can, but this knowledge confirms the way that she has always already understood and positioned herself as a disjointed, solitary, not fully human person. Her work to reconcile both parts of herself yields an unresolvable identity crisis that haunts her in accelerating degrees of intensity for the entirety of the series. It is this compartmentalization that allows her to be strong throughout a never-ending stream of crises, but the disjunction still comes at a cost. Her demon self both rescues and harms her—it holds her at a distance from the pain in her life, but also prevents her from truly managing it.

Buffy's Slayer duties continually interfere with her ability to properly process any of the hardships that she is made to face. This interference is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the show. When Angel decides to leave her, she is unable to grieve as she needs to prioritize saving her prom-going friends from a pack of hellhounds. She cannot take any time to come to terms with the split, stating that "When I think about us, I have a tendency to sort of go catatonic. And I really can't afford to do that right now. Gotta stop a crazy from pulling a Carrie at the prom" ("The Prom" 3.20, 00:26:46-55). When her mother is diagnosed with a brain tumor, Buffy takes responsibility for caring for everyone, refusing again to process her fear and sadness. When she finally allows herself to cry after days of standing firm, she is interrupted to slay the Queller demon as it attempts to kill her mother ("Listening to Fear" 5.9). And when her mother dies, her attempt to begin processing the experience with Tara at the hospital is interrupted when Dawn sneaks into the morgue and needs to be rescued from a vampire ("The Body" 5.16).

Beyond this, even in moments that appear to be safe, Buffy generally denies herself the opportunity to accept comfort from others. She generally implies that she cannot afford the time or energy that it would take to do so, and besides, she believes that no one can understand her since she is the only Slayer,¹ and so their help would be meaningless. For Buffy, identity is defined by the singularity of her duty. The issue of Buffy's perceived aloneness presents itself repeatedly in spite of the fact that each time she breaks down and accepts companionship in her pain, it is invariably an enormous relief. Her efforts to shoulder her internal struggle alone alongside the fate of the world creates strain in her relationships, which ultimately always prove to be her primary source of healing when momentum forces her to share. This happens for the first time after Buffy is drowned by the Master and resuscitated by Xander. She spends the summer afterward in Los Angeles with her father, barely contacting her friends the entire time. Her father describes her as "distant...there was no connection. The more time we spent together, the more I felt like she was nowhere to be seen" ("When She Was Bad" 2.1, 00:06:24-36). Upon her return, the audience is privy to her nightmares and flashbacks, but her friends are only subject to her coldness, antagonism, and outright rejection. Everyone around her recognizes that she is struggling with the traumatic experience of her own death, but she refuses to admit it. Tension builds as the group fights vampires that attempt to revive the Master, until Buffy finally erupts. After winning the battle, she appears to melt down, smashing the Master's bones to dust and then collapsing in tears in Angel's arms while her friends watch in sympathetic silence. Afterward they require no apology, allowing her to seamlessly merge back into the fold. From this point on, Buffy appears to have found closure, and the issue no longer actively intrudes against her functioning.

As time passes, it becomes evident that Buffy's most successful efforts to heal involve sharing some of the burden of her pain with the people close to her, but she finds this increasingly difficult to do. She shrinks back into the protective shell of her Slayerness, insisting that her suffering is her own problem and that she cannot afford to acknowledge it because she is too busy saving the world. This repression invariably backfires, as her issues come to a head anyway and force their way to the

surface at inconvenient times. Over and over, her friends make themselves available to walk her through these moments when they finally arise, regardless of what else is going on. A strong example of this is when, after a full season of trying to protect Dawn from destruction, she falls into a dissociative trance upon Dawn's abduction ("The Weight of the World" 5.21). Willow drops everything to magically enter Buffy's mind and help return her to herself. Together, they pinpoint the moment that Buffy committed what she considers to be her ultimate failure—when the pressure of trying to save Dawn became too much, she thought for a moment that the prospect of losing the battle felt like a relief. Now, believing she has actually lost it, this moment consumes her in hindsight as a fatal mistake. Willow reality-checks this belief and absolves Buffy of her guilt; Buffy is finally woken from her trance, and bursts into tears. After this experience, she is able to return to the fight with a clear mind and renewed vigor. In this case, Willow's mediation functions as a therapeutic intervention.

Buffy's negotiation of the boundary between Slayer-self and human-self is complicated, especially when it comes to her relationships, which appear to be her primary means of healing from the traumas that she is constantly exposed to. These dynamics play out metaphorically after the Scoobies take advantage of their separate strengths by merging into one person for a short time in order to defeat boss-enemy Adam, who Buffy cannot successfully fight alone ("Primeval" 4.21). That night, they are each visited and killed in their dreams by the First Slayer, who has come to punish them all for daring to flout the essential aloneness of the Slayer ("Restless"). And although Buffy appears to resist this interpretation, we can often recognize elements of it in the way she responds to challenges, and in the style of her work to recover from these challenges.

Willow

Willow's struggles are equally nuanced but perhaps more linear in some ways, as her developing magic addiction can be traced almost incrementally from the beginning of the series, in a relatively

straightforward analogy to substance dependence. The addiction parallel is drawn for the first time in Season Two, when Willow suggests trying a spell to return Angel's missing soul. Giles is concerned, telling her to think twice before "open[ing] a door that you may not be able to close" ("Becoming, Part One" 2.21, 00:19:19-21). By Season Four, she has begun turning to magic as solace and a solution to personal problems, which has immediate consequences. In "Something Blue" (4.9), in an effort to magically cure herself of heartbreak, she inadvertently casts a spell causing every metaphor she uses when complaining about her friends to become a literal reality, raining adversity upon them all. In Season Five, she has begun to worry those close to her ("Tough Love" 5.19), and by Season Six, she is actively lying to everyone about the extent of her practice ("Bargaining, Part One" 6.1). Soon afterward, her use of magic destroys her relationship ("Tabula Rasa" 6.8), and she begins to visit a magic "dealer" for more intense highs ("Wrecked" 6.10). Ultimately, though, it is trauma that pushes her over the edge. After witnessing the murder of her girlfriend, Willow snaps, kills the dealer for his entire "supply," flays Tara's killer alive ("Villains" 6.20), physically assaults all her friends, and nearly destroys the world in a fit of agony and rage ("Grave" 6.22).

Willow's experiences with magic parallel her developing understanding of herself, in terms of both personality and sexuality. Magic serves as a decidedly mixed metaphor for both addiction and lesbianism, in an (often contradictory) ongoing conversation about who Willow is. In the latter case, it is evident that Willow's magical practice blooms significantly when she meets Tara, and her friends talk about her "magic practice" and "witchcraft" as euphemism for the relationship when discussing it amongst themselves. When used in this sense, the metaphor generally has a positive, healthy feeling attached to it, associated with evolution and affirmative identity development. At the same time, Willow's developing interest in actual magic is framed first as an enriching skill, and then gradually transforms into a dangerous, self-destructive habit that nearly culminates in her undoing. These separate depictions come to a confusing head when Tara and Willow have an argument about Willow's magic skills, which Tara characterizes as "frighten[ing]" ("Tough Love" 00:17:54). However, the conversation

quickly warps into a question about whether or not Willow is really a lesbian. While the significance of these overlapping implications throughout the show deserve (and have received) further attention², it is important in this context that Willow reacts so defensively to Tara's concern. This argument is the first time that Tara raises questions about the extent of Willow's magic "habit," and Willow's response is to immediately deny any problems, hijack Tara's meaning, and transform the conversation into something else altogether, in order to lay blame on Tara. It is the first of multiple conversations of this sort, in which Willow manipulates the interaction to defer responsibility for her magic's potential harm and transfer blame away from herself.

Willow also generally uses magic as her first response to dealing with upsetting or traumatic experiences. When she catches Oz sleeping with another werewolf, after she steps in front of a car and is almost killed, Willow's first impulse is to begin a spell to punish them both ("Wild at Heart" 4.6). When Tara leaves her, she begins visiting the magic dealer Rack ("Wrecked"), and her addiction spirals out of control. She then agrees to a cold-turkey abandonment of magic, which she is able to maintain for some time, but when Tara is killed in front of her, she instantly transforms into Dark Willow, plunging into an enormous destructive nightmare that consumes her for several episodes, channeling her pain into magically fueled violence and rage. After this, she leaves for a sort of magical "rehab," coming back having learned the basics of magical harm reduction, and is able to use magic in some important scenarios without "going dark" (though the threat of "relapse" remains). In all these scenarios, it is again Willow's friends who are able to draw her back from compulsion and chaos—in her case, generally by displaying forgiveness and allowing her to make amends.

An examination of the motives for Willow's reliance on magic yields repeated encounters with her identity issues. Her transformation over time from a tentative, responsible nerd to powerful superhero is directly linked to the progression of her magical ability. Willow spends high school enthusing over academia, earnestly accepting insults from socialites, and helping other people with their homework. Gradually tiring of this image, she turns to magic as a tool from which to gather self-confidence and social power, and as her skills improve, she becomes

almost entirely distanced from her prior understanding of herself. This personality breach first surfaces in “Doppelgangland” (3.16), when Willow is angered by instances of people taking advantage of her intelligence and willingness to help. Involuntarily assigned to help an ungrateful jock classmate with his homework, Willow finds herself suddenly overwhelmed by the demands made of her by others. Reacting to this resentment, she agrees to help Anya with the dark spell that inadvertently summons vampire doppelganger Willow from the alternative universe created previously without her awareness. Vampire Willow is the show’s first iteration of Dark Willow, and a strong foreboding figure of her upcoming struggles. Regular Willow is uncomfortable seeing this version of herself: “She messed up everything she touched. I don’t ever wanna be like that” (00:43:16-21). At the same time, though, Vampire Willow’s refusal to be walked over solves some of Regular Willow’s problems, serving as an example of the way her dark edges provide Willow with a power she feels unable to obtain in a non-magical capacity. This divergence continues to dramatically impact her understanding of what she needs to protect and assert herself.

Willow’s identity progression maintains this duality, weighing her powerful, aggressive persona against her initial role as passive sidekick. Her conceptual maintenance of this disjunction facilitates a good deal of her loss of control, and it is only when she is able to integrate her two separate understandings of herself that she is able to find balance and use magic responsibly. Although she begins the show apparently comfortable with herself and her social position, after graduating high school she begins to express some resentment about it. After running into Percy at a high school party and overhearing him refer to her as a nerd, she is distraught for the rest of the episode (“Doomed”). When she meets Tara, she does not introduce her to the rest of her friends for a significant period of time, presumably in part because she is reluctant to redirect Tara from circumstances in which Willow plays center stage to a setting in which she functions as a sidekick (“Who Are You?” 4.16). In “Restless,” she and Tara discuss her keeping a secret that everyone already knows, which is revealed to be that her current identity is a costume which, after being torn off, yields a vision of her high school self, wearing a dweeby uniform and reading a book report to the class.

Later, when she becomes concerned that her magical habits have gone too far, fellow witch Amy is able to lure her into further surrender by teasing that “maybe you’d rather sit home all night, alone, like in high school” (“Smashed” 6.9, 00:26:03-09). Eventually, when processing her addiction with Buffy, she admits the source of the problem: “If you could be...plain old Willow or super Willow, who would you be? ... It took me away from myself, I was free” (“Wrecked” 00:39:23-40:16). In turning to magic, she is able to distance herself from shame and pain. While in her climactic crisis, she rejects her humanity altogether, announcing that, “Willow doesn’t live here anymore... nothing can hurt me” (“Grave” 00:06:22-00:14:44). Willow’s use of magic protects her in this scenario until Giles’s “spiked” magical infusion reunites her with feelings of pain, empathy, and the shame of what she has done, while Xander’s unwavering support brings her fully back to herself. After this experience, she works to manage her habit and actively process her trauma in healthy ways.

Conclusion

While in many ways Buffy and Willow’s mental health struggles intersect with well-established narratives of human experiences with and reactions to trauma, the show does not put much stock in traditional mental health models. For one thing, like many individuals who lack access to or are alienated by mental health resources, the supernatural basis of Buffy and Willow’s lifestyles render their encounters with traditional mental health structures generally problematic and ineffective. One strong example is Buffy’s having been committed to a mental health facility in her early teens after telling her parents about becoming the Slayer (“Normal Again” 6.17). This incident mirrors the experiences of many individuals who are disempowered and traumatized by similar encounters with involuntary commitment. Throughout the course of the show, the group has unsuccessful interactions with professional counseling, interventions, addiction treatment groups, and even incarceration as an unfortunate substitute for treatment.

Existing secondary literature has examined *Buffy*'s engagement with traditional mental health treatment to some extent, primarily in relation to Buffy's institutionalization ("Normal Again"). These interpretations generally underscore the representation of conventional mental health treatment structures as reinforcing unbalanced dynamics between vulnerable individuals and hyper-empowered state-sanctioned treatment apparatuses. Peeling and Scanlon read Buffy's internment as an "attempt by patriarchal society to silence her and infantilize her" (9), and identify Buffy's ultimate choice to reject the reality of institutionalization in favor of the "delusional" framework of her heroism as a political move to escape the constraints of confinement. Pearce also reads the role of institutionalization across the Whedonverse as "a form of controlling and punishing women," though she notes in addition the way this value judgment varies according to how much each respective woman "deserves" involuntary confinement based on her perceived level of madness (as indicated by homicidal impulses). This hypothesis could be expanded to include further examination of the disempowering intersection of other vulnerable populations with psychiatric commitment, including the entire demographic of individuals diagnosed with mental illness, and not only the disjunction of misunderstood women versus violently inclined, "legitimately" mad ones. Meanwhile, though, this analysis helps to illustrate a perceived failure of traditional treatment models to address the singular experiences of individuals.

While a more thorough examination of these issues would likely be enlightening, the show's treatment of these concerns is valuable in that it relates to the broader human struggle to self-heal, and speaks to the alienation that many people feel in the face of the resources that either are insufficient or unavailable to them. This approach also allows an exploration of these issues that are timeless and productive: as formal mental health structures develop and change over time, the conditions creating trauma and alienation remain the same. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creates a long-form analysis of self-conception in conversation with trauma, ultimately suggesting that although identity and psychic wellness are often at odds, they can each be measured and optimized in their own right with the support of a trusted and dependable social community.

Notes

¹ The notable exceptions to this singularity are Kendra and Faith, whom Buffy typically refuses to relate to, as she judges Kendra and Faith's reactions to these same pressures to be, in different ways, unacceptable.

² The junction of Willow's magical powers and sexual identity has been explored in other contexts. Notably, Alissa Wilts traces the complicated and shifting implications of magic/lesbian metaphorical parallels in *Buffy Goes Dark* (29-44), while Brandy Ryan reframes the relationship between magic and lesbianism as symbolic rather than metaphorical, noting the instability of the association and identifying contradictions that destabilize the correlation (43-62).

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