



**Cynthia Bowers**  
**Generation Lapse: The Problematic Parenting of Joyce Summers and Rupert Giles**



(1) Much of the storytelling on *Buffy: the Vampire Slayer* has focused on Buffy's and her contemporaries' efforts to subdue a number of external threats: the Master who plans to reopen the Hell Mouth and destroy the world; Mayor Wilkins' diabolical intention to enslave and destroy all humankind; Adam's Frankensteinian plot to create of super-race of human-demon hybrids. But the most perilous threats to Buffy's, and indeed, her generation's, welfare has come from much closer to home. The parenting by and of her mother Joyce and her Watcher Giles is a recurrent theme on the series, one which strongly suggests that the monsters Buffy and her cohorts slay are not limited to those that exist more comfortably beyond their immediate households but also threaten their safety within them.

(2) In fact, the three episodes that have focused on the adults charged with Buffy's welfare—"The Dark Age" (2008), "Ted" (2011) and "Band Candy" (3006)—uncomfortably link Joyce's and Giles' generational "lapses" to past and present drug and alcohol abuse. Series' creator Joss Whedon and his writers seem committed to exploring aging Boomers' parenting incompetence and its relationship to drug abuse. In the first of these episodes, "The Dark Age," Giles' reckless, youthful dalliance with the demon Eyghon conjures images of a drugs-and-violence culture that results in the murder of nearly all of Giles' associates; in the second, "Ted," Buffy's mother selfishly indulges her need for a man with the help of a drug-induced Stepford-like haze; in the third episode, "Band Candy," Joyce and Giles form a drugged and dangerous alliance that is potentially disastrous not only to Buffy but to all of the helpless and abandoned infants of Sunnydale. Typically, the series presents the younger generation's successful efforts to negotiate the parental generation's failures by making explicit and applauding the teens' unselfish generational values. [1] These episodes in particular foreground the adults' "lapses" into self-indulgence, materialism, and substance abuse, all of which cause a crisis of parenting for Buffy that is at least as frightening than her encounters with the external monsters she routinely faces. Each episode also provides evidence of the younger generation's adoption of parental roles and skills and their remarkable success in so doing.

(3) In "The Dark Age," the demon Eyghon may be read as a metaphor for LSD made explicit by Giles' early episode "bad trip" dream flashbacks. Eyghon also represents irresponsible sexuality, violence, and murder, underscored by Giles' youthful

nickname “Ripper” with its violent associations. But Eyghon also symbolizes a kind of cultural monster unleashed by Giles’ and his contemporaries’ irresponsible “generation” and literally demonizes the selfishness, self-absorption, and drugs and sexual experimentation often associated with the 1960s’ psychedelic youth culture. [2] Not even the conservative Giles of the 1990s, the episode’s teaser makes clear, can suppress this fiend even under layers of tweed and adult reformation.

(4) The link between the Baby Boom’s youthful embrace, and adult disavowal, of the drug culture they created has been studied recently by Mike A. Males. Citing the work of historians Neil Howe and William Strauss, Males writes that Baby Boom neo-Puritans, under whose banner the “fuddy-duddy” Rupert Giles seems at first glance to operate, have “grown up” to “a new sense of responsibility and self denial’ imposing strict moral standards on themselves and their peers’”—and most assuredly on their children (340). This description suits Giles’ commitment to Buffy’s Slayer training, to instilling in her a deep sense of personal and generational responsibility—“once into every generation” a Slayer is born. Yet, as the narrative of “The Dark Age” unfolds, it becomes evident that Giles hopes Buffy will do as he says and not as he did.

(5) Giles’ recurring nightmares force him to relive his youthful involvement with “the worst [gang] that would have him.” Two former members of that gang appear suddenly in Sunnydale: one, Philip Henry, tries to warn Giles of Eyghon’s reappearance; the other, Deirdre Page, now possessed by the demon, stalks and murders Henry before he can warn Giles. Giles is shaken by Philip Henry’s death and understands clearly what it means: in a telling moment, Giles, alone in his apartment, drunk and distraught, whispers into the mirror: “So. You’re back.” Who or what is “you” we wonder? Does Giles fear a relapse into his murky past? Or is he referring to the demon? To what degree are they one and the same?

(6) The episode heads toward crisis when Giles uncharacteristically fails to meet Buffy to protect the hospital’s weekly blood shipment. His responsibility-lapse begins the Buffy’s parenting of the adult. Alerted by Giles’ absence from the hospital rendezvous, Buffy concludes that something must be wrong, especially since Giles “counts tardiness as, like, the eighth deadly sin.” When she appears, full of concern, at his doorstep, she is plainly alarmed by his distracted behavior and obvious drinking, his memory lapse and unusual withdrawal. When she presses him for details, she’s told abruptly to mind her own business: “It’s complicated, Buffy, and quite frankly, it’s private,” he snaps. These behaviors—drinking alone, personality changes, loss of interest in one’s work—are all typical symptoms of depression and/or drug or alcohol abuse which Buffy observes, and responds to, with parent-like attention.

(7) Since Giles refuses to, or becomes incapable of, assuming his adult responsibilities, Willow, Xander, and Cordelia must supply the lapse. Willow, especially, substitutes her own for Giles’ research functions, but more importantly, she adopts his parent-like authority. She breaks up the childish sparring between Xander and Cordelia, insisting they either commit one hundred percent to the task before them—discovering how to destroy Eyghon—or, with a revealing use of pronoun, to “get the hell out of my library!”

(8) The metaphorical link between Eyghon’s conjuration and 1960s-style experimentation with drugs and sex is reinforced both in Giles’ confession to Buffy and in Willow’s research. Giles tells Buffy that Eyghon’s “generation” was induced during a “deep sleep” suggesting the receiver’s tuned-out receptive state. The

others' summoning of Eyghon produced in them all an "extraordinary high." When one of their number, Randall, "lost control," Giles recounts, "Eyghon took him whole." "We tried to exorcize the demon," Giles continues, "but it killed him." After a pause, he adds, "We killed him," perhaps for the first time accepting responsibility for his "generation's" reckless and lethal actions. Willow's research makes the link to sexual experimentation: Eyghon's appearance created a "euphoric feeling of power" among his followers; "ancient sects used to induce possession for bacchanals and orgies."

(9) Buffy's parenting of the older generation is observable in her predictable rescues: she rescues the blood shipment at the hospital; rescues Giles and the others from the ghoul Philip Henry; rescues Giles from the possessed Jenny. She also rescues, at her own peril, the very undeserving Ethan Rayne, final surviving member of the cabal and Giles' rogue ex-partner whom audiences will remember as the unscrupulous costume-shop owner in "Halloween" (2006). Unlike Giles, who is consumed by self-pity and regret and who is helpless before the real danger his "generation" has produced, Ethan is viciously self-preserving, eager to substitute Buffy for himself with the demon. Eyghon has, of course, left deep marks on Giles and his cohorts, both visible and invisible. The tattoo that marks Eyghon's followers is tangible evidence of their reckless past. Ethan marks Buffy with the tattoo to symbolically transfer the consequences of his own generation's irresponsibilities onto hers; then, with an "acid" bath, he erases his own mark.

(10) Adults on the series, particularly as personified in Giles, Buffy's mother Joyce, and in Principal Snyder, seem convinced that the younger generation is out-of-control, in need of "Watching," correcting, and policing. However, as Mike Males argues, teen drug abuse and violent crime is largely a media myth; in fact, he writes, "the increase in major crimes committed by adults closely tracks skyrocketing drug abuse among aging Baby Boomers" (11). Real threats to teens' stability comes from within their own families; drug use and related violence among parents "creates more family instability and . . . leads to negative views of kids among adults unwilling to face their own misbehaviors" (11). Aging Boomers, like Ethan Rayne, attempt an artificial transference onto an innocent younger generation. Adults in "The Dark Age" are ineffective or murderous, haunted by their youthful sins, impotent to maintain their responsible roles or eager to abdicate them.

(11) Ethan's actions much more obviously demonstrate the older generation's failure to protect or provide for youth (a theme that runs through all three episodes) and a willingness of the older generation to sacrifice the young for its own self-interests. Only Angel is able to face and subdue Eyghon, but only by becoming himself momentarily possessed by the demon. Angel's participation in Eyghon's demise is a troubling, though momentary, acknowledgment of his darker side, of the demon that will later shatter Buffy's most private world. Adults, even the 240-year-old seemingly benign Angel, are never what they seem.

(12) "The Dark Age" might be characterized as an attack on Buffy's generation from the Left: the '60s rebellious drumbeat—sex, drugs 'n' rock 'n' roll—is obviously invoked by Giles' violent, zoned-out demonic possession. "Ted," on the other hand, may be read as an attack from the Right: in this episode, hypermoralist patriarchy plans to contain the Summers' women within artificially constructed "family values." The title character, whose last name is (as if to underscore the point) Buchanan, shares with his metaphorical hippie brother Ethan Rayne a strong will to self-preservation and a predisposition toward violence and drug use.

(13) "Ted" can be divided into two parts. In the first half of the episode, Buffy expresses an instinctive mistrust of her mother's new boyfriend, Ted, and resists his efforts to win her over. Her friends at first advise her to give him a chance, Willow offering a "pop" psychoanalysis of Buffy's reaction: "separation anxiety, the mother-figure being taken away, conflict with the father-figure." But Buffy, alerted by her mother's "Stepford-like" behavior, trusts her own feelings, concluding: "I'm pretty good at sensing what's going on around me and there's definitely something wrong with this Ted." She's right, of course—in the second half of the episode, the Scooby Gang discovers that Ted, whom Buffy accidentally "kills" after a violent confrontation in her bedroom, is actually a homicidal robot, who, over a period of fifty years, has first enchanted and then serially murdered each of his gullible new wives.

(14) Joyce's parenting failures in this episode are more frightening than Ted's later violent outbursts because her betrayal of Buffy's confidence and trust violates so profoundly the mother-daughter bond. Initially, Joyce is merely annoyed with Buffy's doubts about Ted, and, early in the episode, recites what has obviously become a Summers' household mantra: "It's not exactly like men beat down the door" she begins, "when you're a single parent," Buffy says, completing her mother's well-worn complaint. Buffy feels betrayed and embarrassed when she learns, during the miniature golf game, that Joyce has told Ted about her grades. And she is deeply hurt when her mother disregards her assertion that Ted threatened to slap her for cheating at miniature golf. Joyce scoffs at Buffy's account of the incident, criticizes her "attitude" toward Ted, and then chastises Buffy for dishonesty. Joyce parrots Ted's version of the confrontation and finally defends Ted for "protecting" Buffy from embarrassment by declining to tell her friends that she had cheated. Joyce later betrays Buffy by allowing Ted to discipline her, to "handle" Buffy's reaction to the news that the couple may become engaged. At the end of the first part of the episode, after Ted's "death," Joyce shuts Buffy out, implicitly refusing to believe Buffy's account of what actually happened in Buffy's room.

(15) In the first half of the episode, Joyce is shown to be desperate and selfish; her need for a man blinds her to the effects her relationship is having on her hurt and confused daughter. Part of that blindness is caused, we later learn, by the food Ted has been preparing which is laced with drugs that keep Joyce "mellow and compliant." But Joyce cannot be entirely excused for her enthrallment to Ted because the tainted food can be read as a metaphor for sensual indulgence as well as sexual domination and satisfaction. When Buffy tells Joyce that Ted threatened to slap her, Joyce uncharacteristically dismisses the allegation as preposterous while greedily consuming a pan of sticky-buns Ted has prepared for breakfast. Nibbling sensually and licking her fingers, Joyce coos "This is so delicious!" Buffy's accusation, one would suppose, would at least plant some misgivings in her mother's mind. Instead, Joyce ignores her daughter's claim in order to gratify her sensual needs, selfishly placing her own desire above her daughter's fear. Once again the gratification of personal needs is linked to drug use and associated with the parental generation.

(16) Joyce's self-indulgence and abdication of parental responsibility connects to Ted's imposition of patriarchal "family values." Joyce seems prepared to suspend her duty and surrender her authority to a strong man in exchange for a kind of oblivion in which father knows best, makes the rules, and governs the "little ladies" with a firm hand. But "family values" Buchanan-style only thinly disguise a struggle for power and dominance foregrounded by the number of representations of invaded or transgressed female space in the episode. In the teaser, Buffy discovers that her front door is open and unlocked. She moves toward the kitchen and hears a glass

crash to the floor and her mother exclaim "No!" Rushing to the kitchen door, she discovers her mother and Ted in a cozy embrace. His presence in the kitchen, and his incessant cooking, suggests his co-optation of a traditionally female sphere. Ted later usurps the head of the table at dinner, imposes grace before the meal, calls himself "Daddy," and infantilizes the already submissive Joyce by referring to her with the insulting diminutive "Joycie." In probably the episode's most frightening scene, he lurks in the darkness of Buffy's bedroom, going through her drawers and reading her diary, waiting ominously for her return. When he is "resurrected," he re-enters the house uninvited, but is significantly subdued in the kitchen where Buffy beats him with that traditionally female weapon, a frying pan. At this moment, Buffy symbolically reclaims hers and her mother's space with the triumphant declaration "This house is mine!"

(17) Like Ethan Rayne, Ted Buchanan is ruthlessly self-preserving, disregarding the needs or welfare of the younger generation: "Your mother and I *will* be happy" he declares to Buffy, silencing her objections. Ted's, and his ideology's, will to survive is of course exaggerated by the fact that he is a robot; his anti-feminist, hyper-moral patriarchy is, like himself, utterly artificial and mechanical, devoid of human sensibility. Ted attempts to exercise extreme patriarchal authority to govern, to rule, and to punish, and when he attacks Buffy in her bedroom, in a horrifying representation of domestic violence, he threatens her with institutionalization. Grasping her diary, which is filled with secret Slayer details (of which her naive mother is unaware), Ted snarls "From now on you'll do what I say when I say or I show this to your mother and you'll spend your best dating years behind the walls of a mental institution." Ted's threat to institutionalize Buffy registers the "solutions" offered by youth-blaming pronouncements of hyper-moralist Rightist Boomers like William Bennett and Gary Bauer. Males argue that parental incompetence, and not teen rebellion, is responsible for the appearance of a number of "kid-fixing" services and "tough love" programs that have "spawned a vast and growing legion of treatment, programming, behavior education, and other services designed to manage" so-called recalcitrant youth (232). Such "fixes" for "delusional" and rebellious young women like Buffy would certainly be appealing to Ted Buchanan.

(18) Simply put, Ted, like all patriarchs, will control and/or contain transgressive and potentially transgressive women who refuse to conform to his warped expectations. He will even use violence to maintain his dominance over Joyce. In the second half of the episode, the "resurrected" Ted (who had only been shut down and not killed by Buffy) menaces the now non-drugged Joyce when she insists she, and not he, convey the news of his return to her daughter. Ted slaps her and slams her against the kitchen wall shouting: "I don't take orders from women. I'm not wired that way!"

(19) Buffy and her friends once again rescue a lapsed adult. Willow and Xander help Buffy spy on Ted at work; Willow discovers the drug in the tainted cookies; all of them, including Cordelia, investigate Ted's 1950s lair, discovering the bodies of his previous wives; at the end of the episode, they help Buffy dispose of Ted's short-circuited, burnt-out remains. And typically, Joyce's convenient unconsciousness in the end prevents her from ever learning the truth about Ted, providing viewers with another example of the adult generation's inability to understand the real horrors facing their children.

(20) "The Dark Age" (2008) and "Ted" (2011) present separate but equally poor parenting by both Giles and Joyce. In "Band Candy" (3006), Joyce and Giles form a disastrous alliance; the abdication of their parental responsibilities is once again linked to drug and alcohol abuse, violence and criminal behavior. The situation,

though presented comically, is nevertheless terrifying to Buffy and her friends who are saddled with the responsibility not only to rescue the adults but also to save the next generation, Sunnydale's helpless and abandoned infants.

(21) The title of the episode echoes slang for cocaine ("nose candy"), and the adults who come under the influence of the drugged chocolate bars exhibit behaviors associated with cocaine use—wild nightclubbing at the Bronze, recklessness, violence and indiscriminate sexuality. But their behavior is not linked to their own generation; rather, it is associated unfairly with the teens'. Buffy and her friends are sobered and repelled by the excesses they observe in the adults partying at the Bronze, yet, accustomed as their generation has become, they transfer the adults' misbehavior to themselves—Willow and Buffy cry "They're behaving like a bunch of *us*!" This is, of course, utter nonsense since Buffy's gang is for the most part either scrupulously sober or repulsed by their own experimentation with controlled substances.[3] On the contrary, the series' format celebrates the teens' moral superiority and commitment to defeat the forces of evil, most often figured on the show in the adult demons Buffy routinely defeats.[4] The episode unfairly obfuscates, and thus implicitly excuses, the adults' drug use by "demonizing" the source of the drugs. In "Ted," the drugs are administered by a homicidal robot; in "Band Candy," they are distributed, tellingly, by Mayor Wilkins' African-American demon-assistant, Mr. Trick, whose warehouse appears to be staffed almost entirely by other African-Americans. In both cases, adult drug use is deflected, and, as we shall see, the blame and consequences shouldered by the youngsters.

(22) As in the other episodes, Buffy is alerted by observing adults' lapse-behaviors. Giles misses class, and Miss Barton, substituting at Principal Snyder's request, untypically tells the students to pretend to study until Snyder goes away. Inquiring into Giles' absence, Buffy discovers her mother at his apartment; Joyce and Giles, often cool toward each other, surprisingly cooperate in Buffy's scheduling. Buffy is further astonished when her mother, who has until then forbidden her to drive, hands her the car keys. Buffy, elated to have the car keys, is not yet aware that both Joyce and Giles have come under the influence of the band candy. Having gotten rid of "their" child, they party—drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and listening to loud rock music.

(23) The relationship between drug use, violence, and crime becomes more evident later in the episode when the teens observe the adults drag racing, necking in the park, and stealing candy off the backs of hijacked trucks. Giles, described by Xander as "bad-magic-hates-the-world-ticking-time-bomb-guy," dresses in tight jeans and tee-shirt, prefers his nickname "Ripper" (introduced in "The Dark Age") and speaks in place of his cultured "Received Pronunciation" a Spike-like "punk" London accent. To impress his "date," Joyce, he breaks a shop window and steals a coat she has been admiring. He then taunts and beats a police officer, takes his gun, then straddles a giggling and again-submissive Joyce across the hood of a police car. He tells a concerned Buffy to "sod off" when she objects to his behavior, and in the warehouse he pulls the policeman's gun on Ethan Rayne, his evil nemesis, who, perhaps not surprisingly, returns in this episode. Joyce's behavior is equally out-of-character. She is seemingly titillated by her attraction to "Ripper," cheerfully accepts the stolen coat, mouths off to Buffy, and for some reason is in possession of a pair of handcuffs which suggest a level of sexual danger and experimentation her daughter has no wish to explore!

(24) Predictably, Buffy and her friends come to the rescue not only of the intoxicated adults but also Sunnydale's helpless infants who, as part of the Mayor's and Mr.

Trick's diabolical candy-plan, will become, as Willow discovers, a grisly tribute for the demon Lurconis. Both Joyce and Giles are useless before the demon, Giles more interested in trouncing Ethan than defeating the demon, Joyce fighting off the unwanted advances of a besotted Principal Snyder. Joyce is afraid for the infants, fussing helplessly, but shrinks from actually taking any action. And though Giles assists in beating off the Mayor's cohort, Buffy's quick thinking finally incinerates Lurconis. Buffy, exhausted and worried about the SATs she is preparing to take the following morning, is stunned when her mother tells her to "blow them off"—she'll write Buffy a note. The ever-dutiful Buffy, we should note, chooses to take the SATs despite the tiresome necessity to parent her unruly parental figures.

(25) In all three of these episodes, the teens are either punished or suffer unfairly because of adult lapses and irresponsibility. In "The Dark Age," Buffy's confidence in Giles is seriously undermined, and she has to use her own money (which she was saving for new shoes) to remove the tattoo that had unfairly marked her as a member of the cult of Eyghon. In "Ted," Buffy is threatened, slapped, and beaten, then blamed for Ted's "death" by the doubting (and apparently all-male) Sunnydale police force; Giles betrays her by talking to the police after Ted's "death"; her classmates shun her in the hallways. In "Band Candy," she is forced to pay for the damage to her mother's car even though the accident was caused by a stoned adult who blindsided her. And Snyder insists Xander and the others "volunteer" to clean up the "vandals'" damage to the school lockers and walls. The adults, blind to their own incompetence, refuse to accept responsibility for their failings and deflect blame onto their innocent offspring, creating in them confusion, instability, and a kind of terror potentially more destructive than might be conjured by "ordinary" demons.

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[1]Robert A. George has noted the values of his own "X" Generation as "ideologically and racially diverse, direct, straight to the point, reality based," independent and ingenious at problem-solving (28-29). The forthcoming book, *Millennials Rising*, by historians Neil Howe and William Strauss on the values of children born since 1985 supports George's observations, concluding "they are beginning to manifest a wide array of positive social habits that older Americans no longer associate with youth, including teamwork, achievement, modesty and good conduct" with more in

common with the World War II generation than with their Baby Boom parents (Steinberg 3). Diversity, directness, ingenuity, teamwork, good conduct are all characteristics which could be fairly ascribed to Buffy Summers and her friends.

[2]George outlines the characteristics of the Baby Boom generation as experimental, inquisitive, self-indulgent, and liberal—embracing their anthem “sex, drugs ‘n’ rock ‘n’ roll” (27-28).

[3]See Xander in “Reptile Boy” (2005), Buffy in “Beer Bad” (4005) and Willow in “Something Blue” (4009) for their experience with and responses to alcohol.

[4]Rhonda Wilcox writes convincingly of the teens’ “dread of becoming an adult” and the series’ association of vampirism with adulthood (16; 22).