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Performing the Imaginative Variation: Using *Buffy* to teach Sartre.

I've been teaching psychology for over 20 years. Like most psychology undergraduates, I was attracted to the discipline because it seemed likely to offer me some answers to the questions I had about why people do the things they do and how their experiences affect them. And like most psychology undergraduates I was somewhat dismayed to find that much of the psychology I was taught seemed to have little to say about what it was like to be a human being, to be a person. So in my own teaching I have tried, wherever possible, literally to 'bring psychology to life', to show how the subject matter is indeed exciting and directly relevant to the lives of my students. This also helps when the subject matter is difficult. Psychology often involves explaining complex theories that, on the surface of it, seem and to have little connection with the business of life, so that illustrating them with examples from experiences that we all share and can recognise is a good way of making them accessible.

But in areas that are sensitive this can be a problem. One such area is sexuality, a topic of considerable relevance to psychologists. A few years ago I introduced a session on sexuality to my undergraduate psychology students. This was intended to provide a different perspective on sexuality to the more usual biological and psychodynamic explanations found in psychology. I was interested in putting forward the idea that our sexuality, our sexual desire, is not something prescribed and that we don't have to see sexual preferences that lie outside of, normative heterosexual practices as pathological. Sartre's (1943/2002) analysis of sexuality was a good candidate for this. But his analysis is not simple; it is not easy to explain or to understand. So the challenge was to make Sartre's ideas comprehensible to the students, to show how these ideas apply to real life, to lives like theirs.

So, first of all, let me give you some idea of the task that had to be achieved by outlining the substance of the theory that I somehow had to convey to students within the confines of a two-hour teaching session. Phenomenology comes in a number of varieties, but can perhaps be described as the most psychological of philosophies, since its focus and starting point is our lived experience. It does not ask questions about the objective nature of the world or of people, but tries to understand human experience. Sartre's humanistic existentialism puts a particular spin on the project of phenomenology by proposing two fundamental truths about the human condition: that 'existence precedes essence' and that we are all 'condemned to be free'; whatever it is that we are as persons, what might be called our essence, is not programmed into us but has been acquired through our experience of living, and, no matter how much we are afraid of facing up to it, we are all caught up in a stream of continual and unavoidable choices about what kind of person we want to be. Not surprising and quite fitting, then, that in one episode we catch Angel deeply engrossed in one of Sartre's novels!

For Sartre, whatever we become, we must never accept this as either inevitable or final. To do so would be to live in 'bad faith'. Whatever kind of person we choose to be, this is always provisional; we can change, we could always choose to do things differently. So, for Sartre life is a continual cycle of BEING something (a kind of object, a THING), and wrenching ourselves away from this being by our freedom, our subjectivity, so that we are no longer a thing, we are NO-THING (Being and Nothingness). And for Sartre it is this tension between our desire to be something (the in-itself, or en-soi) and to be a consciousness, a subject (the for-itself, or pour-soi) that is the key to our sexuality. And I'm talking here not in some abstract sense about sexual orientation, which for Sartre was simply a matter of enculturation, up-bringing and so on, or about our preferences for particular sexual objects, but about what it FEELS like to desire someone or to have them desire you. Not easy stuff- and not always pretty.

For Sartre, love, desire and sex are indeed closely bound up with each other, but not in the happy and simple way this is portrayed in many TV shows- you know, you fall in love with someone, they fall in love with you, your sexual desire is excited and you

consummate your love in the sexual act. For Sartre, love and sexual desire, as well as hatred and the desire to hurt, are interwoven and have a rather darker and more problematic origin in our continual struggle between subjectivity and objectivity.

In our struggle to be a subject, to experience the freedom of our own consciousness, we must resist the 'look' of the Other, in whose eyes we are inevitably an object, instead turning our look upon them. We must steal from the Other their own subjectivity, which renders us a thing and thereby steals OUR freedom, we must neutralise it, destroy it or control it. Of course we can never do this finally- the Other is 'condemned to be free' just as we ourselves are, but we feel compelled to try. And we are caught up in a vicious circle of love, sexual desire and hatred because these are all different strategies we adopt to resolve this eternal conflict. There is indeed a thin line between love and hate for Sartre. Loving someone means we want to be the only thing that matters for that person, to be their reason for living- we want to be the foundation of their conscious experience. Victoria Spah (2001) points out that within the romantic medieval literary tradition of 'courtly love' the lover's entire psychological and emotional sphere is occupied by the loved one; they are indeed 'the whole world' to the lover. If we can achieve this, then we have seized control of their subjectivity. When we hate someone, we are in the grip of a desire to rid them from the world- and then we will never again have to suffer the objectifying power of their look. And when we are in the grip of sexual desire, that desire is a strategem, to lure their consciousness into the body, to focus their subjectivity in the flesh and to seize it in 'taking them' through the act of sex.

Sartre puts forward his theory in *Being and Nothingness*, in the chapter 'Concrete relations with others'. It is a dense, closely argued text that takes a good deal of close reading and re-reading. It is not only hard to understand, but also hard to accept, since it challenges some of our most cherished assumptions about the relationship between love, desire and sex. So, for the undergraduate student to have a chance of grasping and reflecting upon it, it needs a vehicle that can carry the message in a simplified but convincing way.

In such cases, my usual approach would be to appeal to students' own experience- but the intimacies of sex is not something people want to talk about in public, among relative strangers. Enter *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As a show aimed primarily at a youthful audience, *Buffy* addresses issues that most students can identify with. But *Buffy* provides an additional possibility, and one that gives it a curiously reflexive turn in the context of using it to teach phenomenology. The central conceit of the vampire, together with its variants of 'vampire with a soul' and 'vampire with a chip', effectively constitute the phenomenological method of the 'imaginative variation' (Husserl). This is a kind of thought experiment, where the essence of an experience is revealed by considering how we would feel if certain features of it were changed. *Buffy* thus allows us to contemplate human sexuality as it is revealed through the not-quite-human figure of the vampire. I decided to take *Buffy* into my classroom- a most unusual move for the teaching of psychology, which is often more at home in the experimental laboratory.

Buffy was ideal for my purposes, since it can get away with showing the darker side of humanity by associating these with vampires. Probably without intending to, Joss Whedon and Co had presented us with the opportunity for a neat illustration of Sartre's argument through a comparison of the relationships between the good guys (the Scoobies), those between the bad guys (the vampires) and- the most interesting of all- those between human and vampire.

The primary message that I wanted to get across was that, if we're honest with ourselves, what we find exciting, what we call the erotic, is more likely to be associated with the play of conflict and power, and to exist in a grey area where love, desire, hate and hurting ambiguously implicate each other and cannot be easily distinguished from each other. We may prefer the fantasy that the good guys simply love each other and the bad guys damage each other in loveless and probably perverted sexual relations, but the truth of normal human erotic experience may be nearer to Sartre's vision of the vicious circle of ambiguous relations, where loving, desiring, hurting and hating bleed into each other. So, with the aid of a selection of carefully chosen clips, I set about the task of explaining

Sartre's position and inviting students to reflect on his vision of erotic life through an exploration of some of the key relationships in *Buffy*.

My strategy was to suggest that it is primarily Buffy's intimate relationships with the two vampires in her life- Angel and, later, Spike- that demonstrate the true conflict and ambiguity of human sexual relations. Other relationships, between humans and between vampires, just seem to play into the fantasy of a good-bad dualism, where the humans, the white-hats, have loving healthy and enjoyable but unexciting sex, and vampires, the bad guys, have twisted relationships, involving degrading or perverted sexuality.

So here's the gist of how I delivered the message.

Vampire/vampire relationships

We are given plenty of reasons to think that vampire's sexuality is aroused by violent acts (vamp Xander and Willow in *The Wish*, Spike and Drusilla in 'Fool For Love' and that vampire relationships are themselves sado-masochistic. For example, in *Harsh Light of Day* and *The Initiative*, Spike and Harmony's foreplay and sex-talk is aggressive. In 'Angel' (season 1), Angel angrily pins Darla against a wall, and she says "You're hurting me. That's good too". But only half of Sartre's sexual cocktail is present here- there is no positive vision of love here, only sexual desire mixed in with the wish to hurt and be hurt.

Human/human relationships

But relationships between human characters appear to be simply the opposite; they are loving rather than sadistic. Throughout many relationships between the Scoobies what we see are relationships where sexuality is foregrounded by love and care. Of course, the most elaborated of the human relationships is that between Buffy and Riley. Buffy and Riley clearly enjoy sexual relations, and their relationship is unambiguously loving. But Buffy and Riley's love life may appear to lack a certain spark. When we see them apparently immediately after lovemaking in 'Out of My Mind', Buffy says: 'Mm. That was relaxing'. Both Riley and his relationship with Buffy appear to be widely regarded

by fans as rather dull. Something is missing- something that Buffy herself recognises in a conversation with Willow in 'Something Blue':

'But then I can't help thinking, isn't that where the fire comes from? Can a nice safe relationship be that intense? It's nuts, but part of me believes that real love and passion have to go hand in hand with lots of pain and fighting.'

Indeed, Riley's situation nicely illustrates the Sartrean attitude of 'love'. Riley wants Buffy to love him, to make him the foundation of her being, as she threatens to be the foundation of his; she is the whole world to him. But she does not confide in him, depend on him, ask his advice, or in any way show that he is at the centre of her world. Riley's contrast between Buffy and the vampire 'trull' whom he pays to feed from him hinges on the fact that the latter is *hungry* for him and wants to absorb him, in a way that Buffy does not.

Human/vampire relationships: ambiguity

But the relationships that do show us all these facets of human sexuality- love, desire, hurt and hatred- are those between Buffy and her vampire lovers, Angel and Spike. It is these relationships that have captured and held the imagination of viewers, and in which we sense and recognise the conflictual and ambiguous nature of the erotic.

When Angel has his soul he loves Buffy. After losing his soul he is maliciously cruel to her. But even when he comes to the school to lure her into a fight, the scene is suffused with a barely concealed eroticism. And when Angel returns in season 3, there is a great deal of exciting tension of the 'will-he-won't-he?' variety. Angel's appeal (to the viewer and, we suspect, to Buffy) lies in the fact that the one persona is dormant in the other; we are never sure just when he may 'turn' again.

Spike's feelings toward and interactions with Buffy through much of seasons 5 and 6 are typically ambiguous. It is clear that he both loves and hates her, both desires her and wants to kill her. Ian Shuttleworth, in 'Reading the Vampire Slayer' (2002) notes:

'It's a thin line between love and hate: that [Spike's] obsession with Buffy is rooted in a desire to get on top of her in an altogether more horizontal context' (p226).

Early in season 5, he is clearly frustrated by his inability to kill Buffy. And when he believes he is about to have the chip removed from his brain, he intends to

'...bathe in the Slayer's blood. I'm gonna dive into it, swim in it, do the bloody backstroke.'

However, in the closing scenes of this episode Spike realizes his desire for Buffy. He has a dream (clearly intended to represent a repressed desire), in which Buffy comes to kill him. In his desperation to 'end his torment' he challenges her to do it. When she hesitates, he kisses her. She responds, saying 'Spike, I want you'. This scene powerfully and compactly demonstrates the ambiguity of Spike's desire. He wants her to kill him. He wants her to want to kill him. He wants her, and he wants her to want him.

The dream/fantasy of 'Out Of My Mind' is powerful because the attitudes of desire and sadism are both present, rapidly alternating, and this is particularly so in 'Fool for Love'. In a climactic scene in the alley outside the Bronze, Spike challenges Buffy to hit him, and when he fails to provoke her to a fight he tries to kiss her. And later, in ('Crush') he declares his love for Buffy but when she rejects him he then oscillates between trying to prove his love and threatening to kill her. But the mixture of hatred and desire between Buffy and Spike is of course most explicitly seen in the season 6 episode, 'Smashed'. Buffy and Spike become locked in a violent physical struggle that culminates in their first sexual union, an act initiated by Buffy and so stripped of any romantic trappings that the line between desire and hatred is shown to be very thin indeed.

Conclusion

These Vampire/human relationships in *Buffy* provide the moments of excitement and erotic tension. By presenting the ambiguity of human sexual relations through characters that are coded as vampire (and therefore bad) and yet identifiably human we are given permission to recognize and engage with this lived experience of sexuality. For the audience, Angel and Spike inhabit both vampire and human worlds and are able to act as signifiers for both. Through this dual signification we are able, as audience members, to engage with some of the darker aspects of human sexuality while superficially reading them as non-human.

Using *Buffy* to teaching Sartre has infused these sessions with a new interest, both for my students and for me. I now have more plans for using *Buffy* in my teaching as a psychologist. For example, the season 7 episode *Storyteller* is a rich source for exploring the ideas of narrative psychology; and Season 6's *Normal Again* is an excellent example of constructivist psychology's argument that we choose our own reality and must take responsibility for our choices. As I said at the outset, I have used *Buffy* to teach these ideas because I felt they needed to be grounded in personal experience. And when it comes to human experience *Buffy* always approaches this with honesty, which makes it an ideal vehicle for teaching about the social sciences.

References

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