

**AmiJo Comeford**

**Slayage Conference**

29 May 2004

Structural Identity, or Saussure Visits Buffy/Angel's World: An Oppositional View of Angel

To the every-day viewer, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its successful off-shoot, *Angel*, fit into a rather common and typological framework—good vs. evil. So, what makes *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* worth more than a cursory glance? Why are we all gathered at this conference on a holiday weekend? Because we have come to know that Joss Whedon's most famous creations truly encompass more than simple typology and archetypes. In addition to the action, adventure and romantic appeal, Joss Whedon's mystical universe becomes a playground for structuralist identity. Using a structuralist model to analyze Angel and how he comes to a more crucial understanding of his identity both in terms of self and the external reality is an invaluable exercise in garnering an even further appreciation for the series, and will serve as the basis for my discussion today.

One way that the structuralist system is created is based on one element often contained in western vampire mythology—Christianity, a religion based on polar oppositions, “No man can serve two masters” or in a Miltonic view, “knowing good by evil.” No one who has seen *Buffy* or *Angel* would argue that Christianity can be a problematic necessity for the characters and writers. Since much of western vampire mythology effluences Christianity, a Christian context cannot be ignored, but in order to widen the show's thematic scope, Christianity and its bifurcation must be torqued to accommodate the demonic and supernatural-generated themes. Yet, the oppositional foundation of Christianity is still essential to *Buffy*'s functionality and appeal, a point noted by Peggy Fletcher Stack in an article that appeared in the Salt Lake Tribune earlier this month. Stack cites a Latter-day Saint leader who was addressing a group of Latter-day Saint youth in Atlanta and was “dressed in starched white shirt and dark tie” and “was there, he said, to talk about serious things.” But then, he “literally ripped off his shirt to

reveal a "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" T-shirt and carefully laid out the moral values of the popular television show."

From the very first episode of *Buffy*, "Welcome to the Hell Mouth," one external identifying element of Buffy's slayer-ness is established—the cross, and from this moment on, Buffy is often seen with a cross, a constant reminder that even though Christianity and its theology is not prevalent in the show, the foundation is still at work, and part of that foundation is polarity. Working within this oppositional context, the writing team has created not one set of oppositions, Christianity itself, but a layering of oppositions that provide tension and the basis for thematic and character development. The simplicity of identifying something by what it is not, its opposite, ought not to bar us from taking a closer look at what Joss Whedon and his team are able to accomplish by using oppositional structures.

Ferdinand de Saussure's analogy of a chess game from his *Course on General Linguistics* is useful not only as a linguistic theory but also provides a useful format for discussing the play of oppositions within *Buffy* and *Angel*. The analogy works very simply. The chess game or system is closed. Only two players are allowed to play the game, creating *form*. Such is the Buffy and Angel universe. It, like the chess game, is based on a closed system, a system that is built on polar opposites, but allows within it infinite possible relations. We need only listen to *Buffy's* introduction to see one clear opposition that is established within the show: "In every generation, there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the slayer." The parameters are: Buffy and her friends on one side, and demons and vampires on the other. There are no other players. These two groups battle from opposite sides of the mystical chessboard. As we know, the stories are all different, the players vary from episode to episode and the method of vanquishing might also vary from demon to demon. Yet, the basic structure or form is still at work: good (Buffy and her friends)

vs. evil (demons, vampires, and whatever else ascends from the hell-mouth). So, it would seem that the show is simple to the extreme. But were it as simple as this, we would not be gathered for this conference today. Enter—a vampire with a soul, Angel.

Joss Whedon's characters are often set up against their opposites, thereby creating definite signification for all involved characters, while reinforcing the Christian foundation of polar opposites—good and evil. The one character who most fully defines himself in this polarized paradigm is Angel. Within Angel the two factions that define Christianity and create the narrative tension are allowed full play. Angel is a structural microcosm for the entire Joss Whedon universe.

Because Angel is a combination of light and dark, metaphorically, we might be tempted to classify him as gray. But that would defeat the delicate tension created through polarity. So, what the writers more often tend to do is make Angel into a parabolic figure, that is with two equal halves separated by a vertical axis, only joining at one point—the point of divergence. One moment when we see this most clearly is in “The Dark Age” when the demon of Giles' youth is released from Jenny and leaps into Angel's body. The demon is defeated by the demon inside of Angel, a reminder that the demon is still inside of him, but is under his control. There is a connecting point, or point of divergence, Angel's body itself, where the demon and the soul both reside, but to maintain a distinct self-identity that allows him to function as a strong character with an independent will, he must necessarily identify himself on one side or the other of the axis. He cannot be both at the same time. Only when he inhabits a gray area that is neither Angel nor Angelus, both representations of the polar oppositions, does he find himself unable to maintain a clear sense of self and self-purpose.

How does Joss Whedon's team maintain these boundaries for Angel? We might be reminded of *Jekyll and Hyde*, momentarily, when we first meet Angel and even more so when we are introduced to Angelus—pure evil, as Hyde is pure evil. Might we then also correlate Jekyll with Angel, a man who is not absolutely evil as Hyde, but is not absolutely good either? After all, Angel can, according to his own words “walk like a man, but [he's] not one.” He has elements of both. Simplistically then, the characters seem to match, but when we really stop to examine how Angel is created, we come to recognize that Angel is presented as **either** good **or** evil, but not both at the same time. Before his appearance as Angelus in Season Two of *Buffy*, he doesn't exhibit any really negative qualities, unless we count jealousy. In fact, up through Season Two of *Angel*, the character is a gallant figure, one whose image is super heroic. And not only do we as audience members identify him as a fighter of evil, he self-identifies in the same way. He sees himself as one of the small band of heroes whose mission is to fight the good fight because it is the right thing to do. In one of the more memorable moments of the Angel cycle that includes his son Connor, Angel describes for Connor the difference between those who fight on his and Buffy's side and those who don't:

Nothing in the world is what it oughta be. It's harsh and cruel. That's why there's us. Champions. It doesn't matter where we come from, what we've done or suffered. Or even if we make a difference. We live as though the world were as it should be, to show it what it can be.

Angel identifies himself as one of those champions, even from the earliest moments of his character. Probably one of the most crucial moments in the Angel character development, occurs in Season One of *Buffy* in the episode entitled “Angel.”

Prior to this episode, Angel is given very little time in the light; he is reserved for the shadows, both literally and metaphorically. He occasionally appears to give Buffy hints about upcoming and pending evil, but even she is not sure whether to trust him completely, evidenced by another crucial scene, also from the first episode. When he presents her with the beautiful silver cross, Buffy asks who he is, and Angel elusively replies, “Let’s just say I’m a friend,” which engenders a truly snappy Buffy retort, “Yeah, well, maybe I don’t want a friend.” And then a great Angel line, “I didn’t say I was yours.” We, along with Buffy, are unsure whether or not he is aligned absolutely with Buffy and her mission to fight evil. But in the episode “Angel,” the character’s journey toward the heroic begins.

During this episode, two instances place him undeniably on Buffy’s side of the chessboard. First, this is the first time that we see him kill one of his own, and not just any vampire, but his former lover and sire, Darla. And he does it for Buffy, for the leader of one side of his being—the Angel side. Secondly, in the closing moments of the episode, and one of the most poignant in my opinion, Buffy kisses Angel without realizing what her cross, the cross that he gave her, will do when it touches him. When she backs away and sees his expression, she makes an accurate statement without realizing the full import of it: “I know; it’s painful.” Yes, for any number of reasons, but for Angel, we become aware as the camera pans down to his chest, his journey and identification with Buffy and her cause has officially begun. He has been emotionally and physically marked as one of hers. One of her fighters. And it is a fight that he never will abandon absolutely, except when he becomes Angelus, of course.

From this point, Angel does not really engage in any questionable activities until he becomes Angelus, a figure of generally pure evil, in mid-Season Two of *Buffy*. On the contrary, Angel’s character is put continually on display as one of self-sacrifice and loyalty to the slayer

and her fight. The heroic mantle that Angel is given in *Buffy* is only strengthened when he moves to LA and becomes the principle figure in the fight against evil. Throughout Season One of *Angel*, we are constantly reminded of his heroism and the aura that surrounds superhuman flawless heroes. Spike's humorous narrative in the opening scene to the episode "In the Dark" wherein he mocks Angel's heroic style, ending with "off to the Angel mobile," serves to intensify the superhero aspect surrounding Angel as do Doyle's comments to Cordelia about Angel's image in the episode "I Fall To Pieces." Doyle even jokingly remarks that he might be a "little attracted" to Angel's image, flying coattails and all. Angel, as Angel, identifies himself on one side of the chessboard, Buffy's side, the slayer side, the good side. And as long as he stays in this side he maintains a clear sense of self. He knows where he is, what his purpose is, and how to achieve that purpose.

Now, can we say the same of Angelus? Clearly Angelus needs little explaining as to how he is created by the writers as a conscience-less fiend. Angel's words about what a vampire is in the First Season of *Buffy* tell us exactly what a vampire is—when a person becomes a vampire, "the demon takes your body, but it doesn't get your soul. That's gone. No conscience. No remorse. It's an easy way to live." And as long as Angelus has no conscience he can reek havoc. Yet, when he allows himself to dip into the gray areas that mix Angel's humanity and Angelus' demon-ness, he loses focus and becomes unlike the other major un-souled vampire figure Spike, who is driven by purely selfish means.

We are reminded of this problem in the episode "I Only Have Eyes for You." By the end of the episode, Buffy and Angel's bodies are overtaken by the spirits of two lovers, a student and a teacher. In the final moments of the possession, we can almost believe that we are watching a drama concerning not the two dead lovers, but Buffy and Angel themselves. We have to

remember that Buffy is not herself, and Angel is neither Angel nor Angelus in these touching moments. When the drama finally resolves itself, and the spirits leave Buffy and Angel's bodies, and Angelus returns to his vampiric self, he has the perfect opportunity to, if not kill, at least try to bite Buffy. Yet, he does nothing. Not even a cutting or smug remark. He simply turns and runs away, then thoroughly bathes himself and takes Duisella out for a "real vile kill" to wash the love and humanity out of his system. Again, when he is encumbered with the emotions and feelings that Angel had, he is unable to function clearly as either one. He runs away from a slayer that he would love to engage and kill.

Now, on to Angel and his need to be governed by the heroic. Throughout Season One of *Angel*, the title character is created as a superhero, a fairly flawless superhero at that. His roles range from protector of stalked women, to gladiator who refuses to kill for his own freedom, to a savior of souls, recall Faith's attempts to kill him. But by mid-Season Two Angel is no longer a hero, a champion, words that Angel doesn't even acknowledge when reminded of them by Lorne in "Happy Anniversary." In fact, in the same episode, Lorne gives an accurate description of where Angel is headed. He is not a champion or a hero anymore—not the Angel of the past four years; rather this is a character who fires his entire staff, and closes the door on a roomful of attorneys who are about to be devoured by Darla and Dru. He does not seek to cause destruction, as Angelus would, but he does not actively fight to prevent it either, as Angel would. He is stuck somewhere in between, and this Angel/Angelus is infinitely more dangerous—even Darla and Dru don't know how to handle him. He becomes, to use the cliché, a loose cannon, one governed by neither of the polar extremities that are so important to the structure of the show and to the character's ability to function. According to Lorne, Angel just continues to "get darker and darker." And his aura is "beige." As Angel continues in his beige phase for a few more

episodes in Season Two, many of us find ourselves wondering, as do the other cast of characters, why he is doing it. When Angel first makes the decision to fire his staff, according to him, it is because his mission is to, in his own words, “burn that law firm to the ground,” and his “crew, they couldn’t handle that. It means they’re still human; it means they’re better off being fired.” He still has a mission, and not an entirely evil one, exactly. Yet, in the end, we find out that his shortsighted mission has cost him something—hope. When he overpowers Darla, he does it, according to him, because he has lost hope. He “gave her everything he had left.” And Darla knows that he did it because he wanted to become Angelus. He wanted to give up on everything...perfect despair, he tells Darla. Angel loses the ability to self-identify and determine exactly who he is in relation to those around him. He is not part of Wolfram and Hart. He is not like Lindsey, but he is not with Wesley, Gunn, and Cordelia either, those who continue to “fight the good fight,” while Angel was “fighting a war.” The consequences of Angel’s beige phase cannot be underestimated, consequences of his actions with Darla, actions that would never have occurred had he stayed true to the marking he received in Season One of *Buffy*, a marking that branded him as a fighter of the good fight. The pain and suffering caused by Holz, Jasmine, and even Cordelia’s death result from his actions with Darla, that is if we choose to take Gunn’s attitude about free-will instead of Skip’s from Season Four.

Season Five is, perhaps, the most extended application of polar oppositions being given up in favor of the in-between area and the consequences that result from that gray area. Angel is given the powerful resources of Wolfram and Hart, but he is not privy to what the Senior Partners ultimately have planned for him and Team Angel. What we do know, is that Wolfram and Hart is an evil law firm intent on turning Angel into one of them for the great apocalyptic battle in which he is prophesied to play a pivotal role. (Interestingly enough his role in the



apocalypse, based on the Shanshu prophecy is to be either a dark demon or a white knight, not a figure in between.) In the opening episodes of this past season, we watched as Angel and his team battled to change the law firm from an organization that served evil clients to one that fought and shut down evil clients, often through corporate channels, like the necromancer. But as the series progressed, the characters became more and more involved in the corporation and its resources and less in fighting the good fight, a point that Spike reinforces to Angel and his team after his arrival at Wolfram and Hart. The battle being waged between Angel as a hero and Angel as a tool for evil is made very clear when Andrew comes with an army of slayers to reclaim the wayward and abused slayer that Angel finds. Buffy's group, the group which Angel chose long ago to side with, no longer trusts where he is or what he is doing. He is not associated with them anymore. In response to Angel's chastising of Andrew, "You're way outta your league. I'll just clear this with Buffy," Andrew replies, "Where do you think my orders came from? News flash—nobody in our camp trusts you anymore. Nobody. You work for Wolfram & Hart. Don't fool yourself... we're not on the same side." Whether or not Buffy actually believes this or not is perhaps not as important as whether or not Angel believes that others believe this and whether or not this comment is in fact a reflection of what he has been feeling about himself for most of Season Five and even more important, whether or not it can be fixed.

Angel is not part of the slayer's group at this moment, but he is also not one of Wolfram and Hart, as we see over and over again as he tries to rid the staff of evil-doers and replace them with beings whose auras Lorne trusts. But it is an impossible task. His in-between status begins to affect his self-identity as well as how those around him identify him—including the woman whose love he would most like to have, Buffy's.

By the time Cordelia comes back for her final performance in “You’re Welcome,” Angel is lost, evidenced by a brief exchange between Wesley, Fred, Gunn, and Angel in the episode “Soul Purpose” as they discuss the possibility of assassination by satellite.

**WESLEY**

Fred, doesn't the Wolfram & Hart satellite have lethal capability? I mean, couldn't we eliminate a target from the air, untraceably?

**FRED**

Yeah, in theory, we could. That is, if we did that sort of thing.

(to Angel) Do we do that sort of thing?

**WESLEY**

It might be the thing to do.

**ANGEL**

Let's kill them all. Warlocks, minions—they're all evil. Sold their kids to the devil. Let's just wipe 'em all out. We got the power to do that, right? Why don't we? Let's just get back to the basics: Good versus evil.

And if we view Cordelia’s episode as a turning point for Season Five, which I believe it is, her entrance is none too soon, occurring just one episode after the previous conversation. Cordelia tells Angel and us that the reason she came back was to “put her guy back on track” one last time, to make him a hero again and he believes her. He finally positions himself again on one side and sees the world as he needs to see it: good vs. evil:

**ANGEL**

Lindsey wasted a lot of energy trying to make me doubt myself. I know it's not even close to over, but I do feel like I can do this. Wolfram & Hart, whatever's coming, I feel like we can beat it.

**CORDELIA**

I know.

**ANGEL**

You do?

**CORDELIA**

I always did. I... I just needed you to know it, too. The Powers That Be owed me one, and I didn't waste it. I got my guy back on track.

Although after this episode's heart-breaking close to Cordelia and Angel's relationship, Angel seems to waver in between the polar oppositions for the next several episodes, in the season finale, we learn that from the moment Cordelia kisses him, he once again identified himself on the heroic side. His waywardness from the Cordelia episode on has been an act, one designed to put him in a position to perform one final heroic, self-sacrificial act—to destroy the Black Thorn, which he does, along with help from Team Angel. As noted earlier, however, there are consequences to be found for Angel's failure to identify with the polar oppositions that are exemplified by his divided nature.

If we see the final episode in a more pessimistic light, we might determine that the consequences of trying to walk with one foot inside evil and one foot inside good leads to the destruction of each member of Team Angel. Arguably, the closing battle scene of "Not Fade Away" is one of impending doom. Angel and his team cannot fight off the army that is confronting them without their own army of slayers or some very powerful mystical energy. They may not fade away, but they will probably explode away—fighting, just as they have always done. Fred, Wesley, and if we are to take Illiria's words at face value, Gunn, have all been casualties of Team Angel's stay at the point of divergence on the axis. Of all the main characters' deaths on the series, only one has not resulted from a neglect of the polar opposites—Doyle's. When Angel ceases to be good or evil, catastrophe results, and choices and options become limited by drastic consequences. Cordelia in the episode "I Will Remember" states that

when “Angel and Buffy get groiny with one another, the world as we know it falls apart,” meaning that when Angelus emerges, the world falls apart. But perhaps a more accurate statement would be that, given the oppositional tensions at work within Joss Whedon’s universe, when characters, in this case Angel, cease to function in a parabolic figure, the world falls apart.