

“What does it take to strike a spark?” Nietzsche’s Apollonian/Dionysian Balance in *Buffy*

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[1] The metaphysics of the Buffyverse are drastically altered in *Once More, With Feeling* (6007). When the demon Sweet visits Sunnydale, life becomes a musical, where music plays an essential role in expression and the action of the characters’ lives. This episode is also a turning point for Buffy. She is dealing with the pains of living and suffering a deep depression after being torn out of a heaven-like - dimension. To make matters worse, she has allowed her friends to believe that they rescued her from a hell dimension instead of tearing her from a heavenly one. Spike is the only one that knows and is her only solace, but he is not enough comfort for her. In *Once More, With Feeling*, Buffy finally admits to her friends where she was (in the lyrics of “Something to Sing About”) and opens up the doorway for change and the development of Buffy’s arc in the season; accepting her position in the world again.

[2] Nietzsche’s aim in the writing of *Birth of Tragedy* was to demonstrate how art and society function in relation to ancient Greek aesthetics and Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. He draws much of his discussion, admittedly, from Schopenhauer’s philosophy of the Will as well as his views on music and art as representations of this Will. Nietzsche agrees that music, in particular, represents the world better than all the other art forms because of its link directly to the Will and emotions (Young 20-21). To describe how art represents the will, Nietzsche divides art into two opposing forces: Apollonian, or the intellectual and rational aspects of art, and Dionysian, the emotion, intoxication, and tragic element of art. These two forces blend in different ways to provide different levels and categories of art. The balance between the two is a constant struggle, but Nietzsche suggests that there is more of a need for Dionysian influences in the world of art.

[3] The Buffyverse changes into a world like Schopenhauer’s because of Sweet’s spell. It is through music, specifically in an operatic style, that the plot develops and emotions are displayed. Buffy’s arc in season six, which climaxes in this episode, is the division of Apollo/Dionysus that Nietzsche describes. Sweet brings with him a Dionysian force – music - which challenges Buffy’s current Apollonian attitudes about life to provide the catalyst in her development as a Slayer but also as a person, to develop a better balance between living and dealing with life and depression.

“Life’s a song, and we all play our parts” – Metaphysics

[4] It is important to try to see how Nietzsche’s ideas correlate to the Musical Buffyverse in understanding Buffy’s action in the episode. For Nietzsche, reality as we know it (or in this case, the Musical Buffyverse as we know it), is a representation of the Will. The Will, to Schopenhauer, is the force which navigates the world. This force is comparable to what the writers for the show do in terms of story arc and dramatic writing in the series. The Will, just like the writers, is the source of meaning in world - not just the meaning of life, but as the meaning of everything as one single force (Young 6-7).

[5] The representation of this reality occurs through art and the plastics, which are a combination of the Will and the man-made ideas that allow it to be understood. The split that Nietzsche describes in art is between the Dionysian and the Apollonian (Nietzsche 19). The Dionysian side is one of succumbing to emotions and allowing oneself to be caught up or intoxicated in art, and ultimately, the reality of the world. The Apollonian side is one of intellect and man-made influence - what Nietzsche calls an illusion, dreams, or distraction (Nietzsche 27). These two characteristics constantly influence one another, in the development of art over time. Their influence waxes and wanes on each other, but Nietzsche claims the need for more of an influence from the Dionysian aspect in his time, in order to have a more balanced art and, consequently, life

[6] The role of music as the central medium of expression is extremely significant in this episode because it sets up the metaphysical realm differently from the ‘normal’ Buffyverse. Emotion becomes a reality in action. It is not just an idea or feeling within the person’s mind. The materialization of emotions and feelings into song, dance, and fire is a direct link between the Will, the abstract of the world, and the reality known through the senses (Nietzsche 40). In order for the characters to express their emotions they must communicate in song and dance. As the Will becomes manifested in the episode, so do the aspects of Apollo and Dionysus within the songs. As the episode and emotion becomes more intense, the songs break away from the more logical, reflective ballads (“Going Through the Motions”, “I’m Under Your Spell”) to aggressive dance and rock songs (“I’ll Never Tell”, “Rest in Peace”, and “Something to Sing About”). Ultimately, the Dionysian effect of intoxication leads to irrationality and the breakdown of reality and life manifesting itself in the spontaneous combustion of the person.

“She is drawn to the fire” - *Once More, With Feeling* as Nietzsche’s Tragedy

[7] Nietzsche explains the workings of Apollonian and Dionysian qualities by referring to the ancient

Greek tragedies as the balance between the two forces. Nietzsche describes Greek tragedy as mainly a chorus singing about a certain tragic figure while the actors are on the stage as merely a dream to the chorus’ song (Nietzsche 56). The drama as a whole is dual in nature – the Apollonian dream occurring onstage, and the Dionysian intoxication of being involved in the story through the chorus’ musical expression. *Once More, With Feeling* works in the same manner, including elements of the Greek chorus and its subsequent detachment from a reality.

[8] Buffy is the tragic figure in the episode because of her descent towards death (Nietzsche 107). Her life, although morally righteous, has a flaw that is destroying it. She is bound by her love for her friends, and in being so, she begins shutting herself off from the world in order to protect them. This detachment from the world, her “going through the motions,” is where her depression lies. She is not an active part in the workings of the world; she is a mere ghost. The tragic aspect of the situation is that her loyalty to her friends is her primary resource and is what has brought upon victory after victory against the evil forces in the world. But in this situation her loyalty and protection of her friends means the undoing and possibly her third, and final, death.

[9] While Buffy and the rest of the civilians of Sunnydale sing, Sweet and the audience make up the chorus. Nietzsche describes his chorus as being one of satyrs, worshippers of Dionysus. The satyr is a half man, half goat creature that enjoys revelry and mischief, a character very much like Sweet. Sweet’s appearance is reminiscent of a satyr, with his long face and beady eyes. But most demons tend to fit a goat-like appearance. It is Sweet’s role as the catalyst and link to imagination that makes him the chorus. “I come from the, imagination” is his explanation for where he’s from, explaining that he is a direct link to the irrational side of human nature, where emotions and ideas need not be logical and intellectual. As a character, he remains distant from the other characters except for when he sings his own song. This distance defines him as the chorus, separated from the stage actors, and his imaginative is the same as the chorus’ in that his curse is the dream.

[10] In Sweet’s song, he explains that he “know(s) what you feel.” His presence, his essence is one that transforms the emotional, Dionysian energy into song. His role is not omnipotent about the drama that is unfolding. He knows what is going on in each of the character’s heads, and uses that along with the spell to create chaos. In this process, he establishes the Apollonian dream state that Nietzsche describes and uses his Dionysian force to drive the main character, Buffy (while many other civilians assume their own main character roles), to her death – the end of any tragic figure (Nietzsche 77).

[11] The episode further identifies itself as farther detached from reality and more like a dream. The characters’ reactions to the song and dance world show that this is not the reality they know, but an alternate universe. Anya describes it best when she states, “It was like we were being watched. Like there was a wall missing, in our apartment. Like there were only three walls and not a fourth wall.” Her description of the absence of the fourth wall is, eerily, the situation they are always in - television - but that is has become their reality now in addition to ours and Sweet’s.

“This isn’t real, but I just want to feel.” - Buffy as the Ideal Slayer

[12] As Buffy’s life is now a musical, she is caught between two different artistic temperaments. This is neither the first nor only dichotomy that Buffy must reconcile in the series. Buffy has had to deal with her role as a girl and her fate as a Slayer, her Slayer role and her love for Angel, and the Dark Power of the Slayer against her previous notions about good. In each case, Buffy achieves a kind of balance that allows her to survive and remain herself.

[13] Buffy’s balance is challenged and redone, just as Nietzsche’s art sways between Apollo and Dionysus. When Dracula appears, she is forced to face the darker side of slaying and her ‘hunting’ (an act she was ashamed of, but then is able to accept as part of her Slayer self). The battle between Apollo and Dionysus is no different. She must find the balance between her pain and her life in order to move on and grow as a whole person. Sweet’s song is a catalyst to this change, adding a titanic dose of Dionysian energy to disturb her Apollonian/Dionysian balance and initiate the didactic shift to achieving a more ideal balance. This dialectic of forces is seen through observing Buffy’s relationship with Spike throughout the season. She gives in to her desires with Spike, a Dionysian pleasure, and then rejects her involvement outright the next morning, the Apollonian rationalization of her actions.

[14] This is not the first time Buffy has dealt with passion and irrationality. Buffy’s interactions with the other two Slayers show the conflict between passion and rationality and how Buffy achieves the middle ground between the two. Kendra, whom we meet in Season 2, is the Apollonian side of slaying. She takes her role as Slayer as a duty, not as a life. It is an intellectual concept that she must fulfill. She has been heavily influenced by the Watcher’s Council, a highly intellectual and unemotional force that treats the Slayer as a tool to fight evil, not as a person. Travers describes the Slayer/Council relationship as such:

“But I think your Watcher hasn’t reminded you lately of the resolute status of the players in our little game. The Council fights evil. The Slayer is the instrument by which we fight. The Council remains, the Slayers change. It’s been that way from the beginning.” (*Checkpoint*, 5012)

Faith, on the other hand, is under the control of Dionysian forces in the third season, listening to no Council, nor adhering to any intellectual moral code. She is caught in the rush and intoxication of slaying and killing, and it comforts her. It is part of the reason she joins with Mayor Wilkins and the motivation for most of her presence in the series, even when she returns as part of the Scooby Gang in season seven.

[15] The two slayers are not negative influences on Buffy. Because of each Slayer’s fate (Kendra is killed and Faith incarcerated), she learns a median between the two extremes. It is this quality that has allowed her to become the great Slayer, living long past the normal Slayer lifespan. Her conversations with the other two Slayers show a growth in Buffy’s ability to balance both her passionate, dark side and her duty as a slayer and friend. She tries to rationalize with Faith and convince her of the Slayer’s place within the human realm while also trying to instill a moral code that relates the Slayer to the rest of the world. Buffy finds the opposite in Kendra. Kendra and Buffy’s talk about emotions is an argument between Apollo and Dionysus. Buffy brings up that a little Dionysian influence can be the power, not a hindrance, to the Apollonian idea of slaying.

Kendra: Emotions are weakness, Buffy. You shouldn't entertain them.

Buffy: Kendra, my emotions give me power. They're total assets!

(*What’s My Line, Part 2*, 2010)

[16] Emotions are a Dionysian power that adds to Buffy, giving her strength (Korsmeyer 165). Buffy’s ability to use her emotions is what makes her distinct as a heroine and as a Slayer (Miller 40). But Buffy is not all emotions and pleasure, as she shows with her interaction with Faith. Buffy has a moral code and a sense of place of the Slayer’s role in life. “A Slayer is not a killer,” she explains to both Faith and Willow later in the season. The Slayer has a role in the universe, and although Buffy does not want to be the textbook definition of a Slayer according to the Watcher’s Council, she is ready to do her duty as a Slayer whatever that may be, even if it means her death (*Prophecy Girl*, 1012; *The Gift*, 5022). In the absence of the Apollonian force of the Watcher’s Council Buffy feels an unbalance and asks Giles, an intellectual, to help her retain a more balanced life in order to deal with the dark Slayer power she is discovering.

[17] In Season 6, Buffy is shown thrown out of balance again, this time towards Apollo. After being brought back she can only deal with playing the role of being alive instead of feeling alive. She is just “walking through the part” as she sings, merely adhering to her role as Slayer but not with the emotions that she had before. Her emotive abilities have been shut down by the trauma of being torn from a heavenly dimension, causing her to be only a shell of her former self. Although she is able to kill the demons, they notice Buffy’s lack of wholeness. “She’s not even half the girl she...*ow*.”

[18] Buffy’s Apollonian attitude holds strong until Sweet casts his spell. Sweet, the “creature-feature” of the week, brings emotion into the world using music and dance, the materialized form equivalent to pure Dionysian spirit. This disturbs Buffy’s world and throws the balance, bringing her to admit to her friends that she was in a heaven-like dimension instead of a hell. But Buffy’s resistance is still strong throughout much of the episode. “Going Through the Motions” is not the emotional power-ballad that one would expect from the Slayer, and neither is her speech in “I’ve Got a Theory” the awe inspiring Buffy that the Scooby Gang knows. It is not until Buffy sings “Walk Through the Fire” that she is able to contemplate her position in life to the audience.

“I touch the fire and it freezes me
I look into it and it’s black.
Why can’t I feel?
My skin should crack and peel.
I want the fire back.” (6007)

The fire is emotion and passion, the force that makes people feel and live. The relation to fire is not coincidental either. The fire, or spark, is what has been killing the local civilians during the episode. Their emotions conquer them and kill them. Buffy has the opposite problem; she lacks those emotions. The call for the fire is her wanting to feel again, but also knowledge of her own death. Her desire to feel is her tragic characteristic that leads to death, as in Nietzsche’s description of Greek tragedies (Nietzsche 77).

“It’s just, clearly our number is a retro pastiche that’s never going to be a breakaway pop hit.” – Music in Buffy

[19] The larger implication of this balance is its insight into how music is used in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Music is a link directly to the emotions, though appealing to both Apollonian and Dionysian sides. Music’s Apollonian side deals with the lyrics and order of the song as it corresponds to material reality or rationality. The Dionysian side is the immaterial aspect of music as well as the intoxication and

direct link to the emotions without having to translate them into logical structures. *Buffy* has treated music in more of an Apollonian way, adding sense and ambiance to a scene with either fight music or popular music. The fight music is background, or nondiegetic, music that highlights the action going on. The lyrics are often key to *Buffy*’s popular music, describing the emotions or situations of the characters. In addition, the popular music is normally diegetic music, meaning the music has a source from within the action on the screen (Dechert 218). *Once More, With Feeling* features diegetic music as well, but with original songs and score. The instrumental parts are nondiegetic in the normal sense because the orchestra is not seen, but also diegetic because the source of the music is known and originates within the story (through the characters, and magically from Sweet). This adds to the ‘musicale’ quality of the episode and sets up the reality as a detachment from reality, the normal Buffyverse, to a world of illusion, Musical Buffyverse.

[20] This departure from pure diegetic music is a showing of complex emotions. All of the characters are expressing ideas that words alone can not give justice to in conveying feelings. The Dionysian influence has other forms apart from songs and absolute music. Dawn’s dance and the spontaneous combustion of people are examples of how musical forms can express that which we cannot say. When emotions become too high for words the characters break into dance. “Look at me, I’m dancing crazy!” Anya exclaims as she and Xander bubble over in their song “I’ll Never Tell.” Dance is the body’s way of expressing music, and is another manifestation of the power behind the spell and Dionysian emotion. The fire and spontaneous combustion that some civilians face is the ultimate manifestation of emotion overcoming rationality.

[21] Through the fire and death the dangerous aspect of Dionysian spirit is shown. Nietzsche, in claiming that the world needs more of a Dionysian influence in the world, admits that it cannot be pure. Metaphysically, it is impossible without dying. To perceive something means that one takes it into Apollonian consideration. *Buffy* shows another aspect that Nietzsche describes - the total submission to death. The Dionysian life cannot exist because it goes towards death, the reason it inspires tragedy. Buffy chooses death in her confrontation with Sweet, and then begins what could have been her last song, ever. The constant connection to Dionysus cannot be maintained by humans, as Sweet explains over a burned corpse “That’s the penalty, when life is but a song.” After a time, emotion must be reasoned with or it will burn you up from the inside – literally in the Musical Buffyverse’s case.

“Give me something to sing about.” - Conclusion

[22] Due to the metaphysical shift that occurs concerning music and reality in *Once More, With Feeling*, Buffy not only does battle with Sweet and his minions, but also between the gods Apollo and Dionysus and her fate as a tragic heroine. The episode fits Nietzsche’s descriptions of tragedy and art, because the world is transformed into art for a time. Buffy’s battle between the two is a familiar one, but in this episode the abstract concepts that she had discussed with Faith and Kendra materialize and become reality in song. She survives because of her life, and how she lives it. She prevails by the end of the season because she finds her balance again, after swinging back and forth between the two forces. Only when they became real to her could Buffy realize her problem, and set herself on the track to fix it and gain her former power. *Once More, With Feeling* ends with a challenge from Sweet – “Say you’re happy now. Once more, with feeling.” It is this challenge that Buffy encounters throughout the rest of the season in order to achieve a balance of Dionysian and Apollonian living. By the end of the season she allows herself to feel as a part of her friends, a sister to Dawn, and as a Slayer that belongs in the world.

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