

Beer Good: Demon Brew and the Cave Slayer

Len Geller

Contrary to the opinion of many fans and critics, I have always thought that Season Four of *Buffy* (1997-2003) was one of the stronger seasons of the seven year show, not least because of “Hush” (4.10) and “Restless” (4.22), two of the most creative and spell-binding episodes in the entire *Buffy* corpus, but also because of the coming-of-age narratives involving Buffy, Willow, and to a lesser extent Xander. Season Four marks a major transition between high school adolescence and adulthood, and the Buffy and Willow who appear in the early episodes have undergone significant life changes by the time of “Restless,” the season-ending episode. It is also a major departure from the first three seasons, where the overriding narrative arc involves Buffy and the gang trying to defeat a formidable enemy and avert an apocalypse. To be sure, Season Four does have the usual Big Bad (Adam) and the threat of an apocalypse, but that narrative thread only runs from “The I in Team” (4.13) through “Primeval” (4.21), or less than half the season. Far more inclusive is the coming-of-age narrative that runs from the “The Freshman” (4.1) through “Restless” (4.22). Like Season Six later, Season Four takes an existential turn where the primary focus is the personal and intersubjective conflicts

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of the major characters, making it, like Season Six, rich in psychological tension, subtlety, and insight.

For Buffy, one of the first major challenges in Season Four is how to cope with a relationship gone bad that begins in “Living Conditions” (4.2) and ends in “Beer Bad” (4.5). Buffy falls for fellow student Parker Abrams, sleeps with him, and then Parker dumps her. The consequences for Buffy are devastating. Deeply hurt and confused, she is torn apart by conflicting beliefs and desires and is unable to resolve the conflict in her normal state. Only when she undergoes an extreme physical transformation and regression brought on by drinking beer laced with a demon potion is she able to resolve the conflict and get on with her life. Even though this subject-matter (girl meets boy, girl sleeps with boy, boy dumps girl or vice versa, girl/boy is heart-broken) is a time-worn cliché, presented countless times in television, film, and literature, its treatment in these episodes is original, creative, and challenging, offering important insights into the nature of the self, how it uses dissemblance to get what it wants, and how it copes with conflict. In what follows, this essay will lay bare and explore the origin and structure of Buffy’s conflict, which is really a paradigm case of cognitive dissonance; her unsuccessful strategies in resolving the conflict; and the surprising solution in the madcap comedy “Beer Bad.” Along with “Hush,” “The I in Team,” “Primeval,” and “Restless,” “Beer Bad” marks an important stage in Buffy’s evolution in Season Four, and has a subtlety and depth seldom noticed by fans and scholars. Before taking up the Buffy-Parker thread, however, we need to examine a serious criticism and the misunderstanding of “Beer Bad” that has dogged the episode almost from its inception.

Controversy and Misinterpretation

No episode of *Buffy* has been more maligned and misunderstood than “Beer Bad.” If you Google “Beer Bad,” you will find a torrent of harsh criticism, with most fans ranking it among the worst episodes of *Buffy*, and at least two websites ranking the episode dead last among all 144 episodes of the series.¹ One of the most common criticisms but also the weakest is that “Beer Bad” is nothing but mindless slapstick and has very little to do with the narrative arcs of the fourth season. In what follows, we will see that this criticism does not hold up under careful analysis. Another common criticism is that the episode uses an artificial contrivance (Buffy’s transformation into the Cave Slayer) to resolve Buffy’s problem with Parker. As we will see later, this criticism, even if correct, has very little bite and overlooks the real significance of the metaphor.

But there is one serious criticism of “Beer Bad” that we must take up now, since it raises disturbing questions about the creation and production of the show. Based on a ground-breaking exposé by Daniel Forbes in *Salon.com* in 2000,² the criticism alleges by innuendo and implication that the writer (Tracey Forbes) and producers (Marti Noxon, Doug Petrie, and Joss Whedon) of the show caved in to the commercial interests of the network (WB) by allowing the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) in the federal government to influence the show’s content. It should be noted, however, that Forbes never makes this allegation in his article. In fact, as we will see shortly, he provides some evidence to the contrary. Nevertheless, controversy surrounding “Beer Bad” began to appear shortly thereafter among *Buffy* fans and critics and finally found its way to Wikipedia in 2005, from which it has spread like a meme to numerous other websites ever since. According to Wikipedia, “the plot (of “Beer Bad”) was written with the plan to take advantage of funds from the ONDCP available to shows that promoted an anti-drug message.”³ Even though this claim may be true (we will see shortly if it is),

it is never considered in conjunction with other salient features of the episode that completely alter its meaning and significance. As such, it stands alone and clearly implies, though Wikipedia does not say so explicitly, that the episode's writers and producers compromised their artistic integrity by selling out to commercial interests, failed to disclose to their viewers the role that ONDCP played in the creation of the episode, and were complicit in creating and advancing propaganda approved by the government. These claims, as we will see, do not hold up under critical scrutiny. What is remarkable is that this posting in Wikipedia was never challenged or modified, during which time it may have played a major role in shaping fandom opinion of the episode.

Some readers may wonder why a criticism of this sort is relevant to an overall aesthetic analysis and assessment of "Beer Bad" and the Buffy-Parker thread. Playing devil's advocate for a moment, let us assume that this criticism of "Beer Bad" is correct, that the writer and producers of the show in collusion with the WB and the government did introduce an anti-drug message into the episode in order to boost advertising revenues for the network, and did so without viewer knowledge. What bearing does this have on the artistic quality and assessment of the show? The answer is simple: propaganda is the antithesis of art, and when it appears in a television episode, it degrades the artistic quality of that show. Unlike quality television that defies expectations, challenges biases and assumptions, opens up new worlds and possibilities, and has a complexity and depth that invite critical reflection and analysis, propaganda does the exact opposite. It reinforces typical expectations, confirms bias and prejudice, presents a closed and distorted picture of the world, and deadens critical reflection and analysis. Its purpose is solely didactic, and it uses deceit and manipulation to shape viewer attitudes and beliefs. If we are to make the case for the artistic quality of "Beer Bad," answering this criticism is unavoidable.⁴

Before examining the criticism more carefully, we need to clarify the context in which this controversy arose over twenty years ago.⁵ In late 1997 Congress approved legislation that would allow the ONDCP to buy ad time from the major TV networks, including Buffy's network, the WB, for anti-drug advertising as long as the networks agreed to sell the ad time at half-price. The ONDCP received \$1 billion for five years (\$200 million per year) that was expected to buy \$2 billion worth of anti-drug ads at a 50% discount. Though not crazy about the deal, the networks went along and sold millions of dollars of advertising space to the ONDCP. Soon thereafter in early 1998, when the economy began to improve with the dot-com boom, the networks began to balk at this arrangement, since they would be losing millions of dollars of already sold but unredeemed advertising time that could be resold to commercial advertisers like Microsoft, Yahoo, and IBM at a full 100%. In response to network dissatisfaction, the ONDCP devised a plan where it would be willing to give up advertising time already purchased in exchange for the placement of anti-drug themes, messages, and sub-plots in prime-time shows. All of the major networks, including the smaller WB, were more than happy to accept this compromise, since it would allow advertising time sold to the government at 50% to be resold at full commercial value. Once a formula was in place to determine the monetary value of these anti-drug themes and messages and their equivalent value in ad time, the networks could submit advance copies of the scripts to the ONDCP for review and, if necessary, alterations. If the anti-drug message in the show matched what the ONDCP was looking for, the network would get credit for a certain amount of ad time that it could then resell to a commercial advertiser. If there was no match, the script was either rejected outright or modified after input from the drug office to achieve a match. While the government did not impose its anti-drug crusade on the networks, it did provide a strong financial incentive for the networks to include anti-drug messages and themes in their major programs, an incentive that none were able to

resist. In the 1998-1999 TV Season, there were two dozen prime-time shows where single or multiple episodes with anti-drug themes, messages, and sub-plots were redeemed for advertising time.

What does this have to do with *Buffy* and “Beer Bad?” What we know for sure is that the WB regularly encouraged scripts with an anti-drug message from its writers and producers and then submitted the scripts to the ONDCP for approval and possible alteration. During the 1998-99 TV season, the WB redeemed over \$300,000 worth of ad time with anti-drug messages in two of its major shows, *7th Heaven* (1996-2007) and *The Wayans Bros.* (1995-1999). We also know that the WB did submit the script of “Beer Bad” to the ONDCP, but it was rejected outright because it was not on-message (to use the lingo of the ONDCP). According to a spokesperson at the ONDCP who read and helped reject it, “...it wasn’t on-strategy. It was otherworldly nonsense, very abstract and not like real-life kids taking drugs. Viewers wouldn’t make the link to our message” (Forbes).

These facts raise three important questions. First, did the WB instruct, encourage or otherwise influence the writer and producers of “Beer Bad” to include an anti-alcohol and anti-drug message in the narrative? Second, if the answer to the first question is yes, then did the writer and producers know that this messaging was part of a plan to disseminate government propaganda during prime-time programming? And third, is there in fact an anti-alcohol and anti-drug message in “Beer Bad” and, if so, what is it?

The answer to the first question is that while there is no hard evidence to show that the WB did influence the episode’s content, there is a strong presumption that it did, although the nature of this influence will never be known unless someone involved in the show’s creation and production is willing to admit and discuss it, which has not happened in over twenty years since the episode’s first broadcast on November 2, 1999. Given the troubling facts concerning the WB’s redemption of ad time with

its other prime-time programs and the fact that the WB did submit the script of “Beer Bad” to the ONDCP for approval, no other conclusion seems tenable. In his article on the WB’s censorship pressures on *Buffy*, Kevin Andrew Murphy reaches the same conclusion, affirming that the writers of “Beer Bad” were “ordered to write anti-drug and -alcohol propaganda,” and Matthew Pateman agrees with him (Murphy 143, Pateman 230, n.30). But the argument of this essay, to be laid out shortly, is that it doesn’t matter if the writer and producers of the show did interject an anti-drug message at the urging of the network, because in the end they diluted and sabotaged it.

The answer to the second question is that it is very unlikely that the writer or producers of the show had any knowledge of the WB’s arrangement with the ONDCP. Not only is there no hard evidence or smoking gun to support this claim, but this conclusion is consistent with the findings of Daniel Forbes, the Salon reporter who originally broke this story. After interviewing twenty writers and producers for major shows, Forbes found only one person who even knew of this arrangement with the ONDCP (Forbes). Murphy supports these findings, claiming that in many cases the WB “did not inform the writers or producers of why the network brass were requesting such stories, or that the scripts were being vetted at the White House” (Murphy 143). What this suggests is that the major networks kept many of the writers and producers in the dark about this arrangement, lest they openly opposed it and created a public controversy. If the Whedon team did have knowledge of this arrangement, this probably would have been an added incentive to turn the script on its head and sabotage the message.

Finally, does “Beer Bad” have an anti-alcohol and anti-drug message, as so many fans and critics allege? One of the major arguments of this paper (yet to come) is that “beer bad” (Xander’s exhortation to the Cave Slayer) clearly has an ironic meaning. Far from being “bad” or harmful, Buffy’s consumption of Black Frost (the demon brew) is “good”

or beneficial because it allows her to break her emotional attachment to the insidious Parker. If there is an anti-alcohol message in “Beer Bad,” it does not involve Buffy but rather has to do with the harmful effects of binge drinking on college campuses, especially among fraternity men. In an interview, Doug Petrie, one of the producers of the show, confirms this intent:

Beer Bad ... We were just trying to mine the college experience as much as possible and what happens there. Well, very young people get unlimited access to alcohol and become horrible! We all do it—or most of us do it—and live to regret it, and we wanted to explore that. So the metaphor of college boys—intellectual college boys who drink and become Neanderthal—is pretty straight up. (Petrie)

I can't help but think that Petrie is being disingenuous here. Does anyone really believe that young people become “horrible” and turn into mindless brutes when drinking alcohol? Of course, just like adults, a very small minority of young drinkers do become obnoxious, angry, and even dangerous to themselves and others, but most do not. If you really wanted to incorporate a serious and effective anti-alcohol motif into the narrative, why resort to slapstick comedy and surreal metaphor to do it? It is worth pointing out that the real dangers of binge drinking among fraternity men—like alcohol poisoning deaths and sexual assaults including date rape and gang rape—are never mentioned or explored in “Beer Bad.” And for good reason: this isn't the point of the Neanderthal metaphor. On the surface it appears to convey an obvious anti-alcohol message (look what happens to college kids when they drink too much), but then the narrative undermines it with a barrage of slapstick comedy that destroys its credibility. Consider, for example, the following exchange between Xander and Giles when the latter first learns that Buffy may have devolved into the Cave Slayer after consuming the demon brew:

Xander: Well, I cut her off before the others so I don't think she had as much to drink.

Giles: I can't believe you served Buffy that Beer.

Xander: I didn't know it was evil.

Giles: But you knew it was beer.

Xander: Well, excuse me, Mr. "I spent the Sixties in an Electric Kool-Aid Funky Satan Groove."

Giles: It was the early seventies and you should know better. (00:30:20-32)

Here Giles plays the straight man, the mouthpiece for the WB's (and government's) anti-alcohol message, while Xander undercuts it and exposes its absurdity. Citing this exchange, Kevin Andrew Murphy describes "Beer Bad" as a "hilarious parody" of the dangers of alcohol, and Matthew Pateman echoes Murphy's call for a serious rereading of "Beer Bad" (Murphy 143, Pateman 73, 230, n.30.). Throughout the narrative, ridicule masquerades as didactic metaphor, and surprisingly, many people, including the WB executives who submitted the script to the government, fell for the masquerade.⁶

Seduction

We can now return to the Buffy-Parker narrative thread, especially as it plays out in "Beer Bad." It is important to keep in mind that as Buffy begins college in Season Four, she is still a teenager with a traditional self-image of femininity, and there remains a deep incongruity, a major disconnect, between her life as the Slayer and her life as a young woman entering college. As the Slayer, she is strong, fearless, and the Alpha leader of the Scooby Gang, but as a teenager on the cusp of womanhood, she is

naive, inexperienced, and unsure of herself when it comes to relationships. As she begins college, her only meaningful relationship (with the vampire Angel) has resulted in pain and heartache. Her lone sexual experience has resulted in disaster, causing her beloved Angel to change into the sadistic demon Angelus who is bent on torturing her psychologically by murdering all of her loved ones before killing her and turning her into a vampire, just as he did with Drusilla. Even when Angel returns from a hell dimension in Season Three, both he and Buffy realize their relationship has no future and go their separate ways. Despite this painful and tragic outcome, Buffy is not cynical or shy about developing a new relationship at college. Enter Parker Abrams. Buffy first meets him in the school cafeteria lunch line (“Living Conditions” 4.2), and there is an immediate connection. Parker is handsome, witty, sensitive, and intelligent, plus he seems like a regular guy without a dark side, and Buffy is instantly drawn to him. Soon they start dating and end up sleeping together in Parker’s dorm room (“The Harsh Light of Day” 4.3). The following morning when she asks if he wants to get together again that evening, he gives an excuse but promises to call her. Of course, he never does, and Buffy is heartsick and filled with self-doubt. When she meets him later on campus, Buffy overhears him using the same pickup lines on another girl (Katy Loomis) as he used on her. Despite this red flag, Buffy interrupts his conversation, and after Katy leaves for class, asks him a second time for a follow-up date. When her offer is met with another excuse, she seeks an explanation:

Buffy: Did I do something wrong?

Parker: Something wrong? No, of course not. It was fun. Didn’t you have fun? Watch out how you answer that. My ego is fragile.

Buffy: You had fun? Is that all it was?

Parker: What else is it supposed to be?

Buffy: It seemed like you liked me.

Parker: I do, but I'm starting to feel like it meant...what? Some kind of commitment? Is that really what you want right now?

Buffy: I just thought...

Parker: Look, I'm sorry if you misunderstood something. I thought things were pretty clear.

Buffy: I didn't mean to mis— ... I'm sorry.

Parker: Look, I really have to go now. (00:35:38-36:39)

This scene, though painful to watch, shows that Buffy and Parker have very different motivations and expectations when it comes to sex. For Buffy, sexual intercourse isn't about the selfish pursuit of pleasure but about intimacy and connection with a partner who is valued and respected. It is primarily about shared pleasure and emotion, the creation of a "we" involving some measure of commitment going forward. For Parker, on the other hand, sexual intercourse is ostensibly about the mutual pursuit of pleasure, the joint satisfaction of two "I's," but nothing more and certainly not involving any commitment. On the surface, this view, though at odds with Buffy's, seems morally unobjectionable. What is wrong with the mutual pursuit of pleasure as long as neither partner is exploited or harmed? Sure, Buffy has been hurt emotionally, but it was unintentional, the result of a misunderstanding, and she needs to get over it and move on.

The truth, however, is more complicated. As we gradually learn, especially from Willow's conversation with Parker later in the pub, his persona masks a more sinister agenda. On the surface, Parker seems to be just a fun-loving guy with different sexual and emotional expectations than Buffy, but in fact he is deeply addicted to acting out seduction scenarios again and again (whenever Buffy sees him, whether in class, the cafeteria, or the pub, he is with a different girl), and as Buffy discovers when she overhears his conversation with Katy Loomis, using the same pickup lines over and over. He is so out of control that he even tries to seduce Willow

once he is convinced by her clever performance that he has won her over. Parker is an addict, but he is not addicted to sexual pleasure, as Willow seems to think as she berates him in the pub. He is addicted to power and the rush that it brings. If sexual pleasure were his primary aim, that could easily be satisfied by a steady partner or fantasy-induced masturbation. What he really wants, as he confides to Willow, is the “fire” (00:24:10-11), the thrill of seduction and conquest. What he doesn’t tell Willow is that this seduction scenario also includes dumping his victim with complete indifference to the consequences. Parker uses the persona of the sensitive, self-effacing, and caring guy to seduce his victim and then plays the harmless hedonism card, as he does with Buffy and Willow, to justify his actions when questioned or challenged. But, in fact, his explanations to Buffy and Willow are nothing more than rationalizations masquerading as justifications. Buffy has had the misfortune to fall for a guy who isn’t just a misogynist but a manipulative predator who has so refined his craft as to conceal his true aim from his victims.

But how does Parker accomplish this seduction if Buffy chooses freely and non-coercively to have sex with him? It still seems that despite his roaming eye and incessant womanizing, his sexual partners are making free choices and are not victims of seduction. According to Lorna Jowett, the key to understanding Parker’s *modus operandi* is Spike’s disparaging and goading remarks to Buffy as he pummels her in “The Harsh Light of Day” (123). As she notes, just as he exposes the dark side of Tara’s father and siblings in “Family” (5.6), Spike explains to Buffy (and us) how Parker has seduced her: “Did he play the sensitive lad and get you to seduce him? Good trick if the girl’s thick enough to buy it” (00:39:56-40:01). Earlier in the same episode, after Parker has laid the groundwork by stressing the importance of “making choices” (00:22:11-23), Buffy and Parker enjoy their first kiss, and Parker asks, “Is this OK? Because I can stop if you wanted, it’s your choice” (00:22:40-46). Taking the bait, Buffy makes her “choice” that leads eventually to sex. Buffy thinks the choice is her own,

but in fact she has been subtly manipulated into making it and claiming it as her own. For Jowett, “‘playing the sensitive lad’ is a strategy that Parker adopts in order to make his conventionally masculine conquests. The success of this strategy relies on traditional moral and sexual values. If the girl thinks *she* seduced *him*, then she is likely to blame herself, as indeed Buffy does” (123). Parker’s strategy also allows him to avoid responsibility for any messy fallout and maintain a cover of blamelessness, as he does throughout his conversations with Buffy and Willow.

Parker is an example of what Jowett calls “the new man” in a postfeminist age in contrast to the traditional homosocial tough-guy masculinity as represented by Daryl in “Some Assembly Required” (2.2), Pete in “Beauty and the Beasts” (3.4), Jack in “The Zeppo” (3.13), Riley in Seasons Four and Five, and Warren in Season Six. But like the depictions of other “new men” in *Buffy*—e.g. Owen in “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date” (1.5) and Ford in “Lie to Me” (2.7)—Parker is unable to transcend the narcissism and sexism of traditional masculinities. Far from representing a new and liberating masculinity, he represents a new version of the old masculinity forced to adapt to a postfeminist world. While the presentation of masculinity has changed, the darkness remains.⁷

Conflict

At the end of “The Harsh Light of Day” Buffy tries to make sense of Parker’s behavior and her own feelings in the following conversation with Willow:

Buffy: So, what I’m wondering is: Does this always happen? Sleep with a guy, and he goes all evil. God, I’m just a fool.

Willow: Well maybe you made a mistake, but that’s OK...

Buffy: Parker said it’s OK to make mistakes. It was sweet.

Willow: No, it wasn't. He was saying that so you would take a chance and sleep with him. He's a poop head.

Buffy: You're right. He's manipulative and shallow, and why doesn't he want me? Am I repulsive? If there's something repulsive about me, you'd tell me, right?

Willow: I'm your friend. I would call you repulsive in a second.

Buffy: Maybe Parker and I could still work it out? Do you think we could still work it out?

Willow: I think you're missing something about the whole poop head principle. (00:41:38-42:39)

What this scene shows is that Buffy has a severe case of cognitive dissonance, a conflict between two incompatible sets of beliefs. Despite overhearing the damning conversation with Katy Loomis, she discounts what she has heard and blames herself for the collapse of the relationship. She still believes or at least wants to believe that Parker is a decent and sensitive guy who has strong feelings for her and wants to continue the relationship despite strong evidence to the contrary. Let us call this belief set "A." On the other hand, because Parker has cooled off their relationship and brushed her off, Buffy suspects that he has played her for a fool. She has begun to believe that Parker's words are hollow, his sole aim is seduction, and he doesn't care for her at all. Let us call this belief set "B." Buffy now finds herself in an impossible situation: "A" and "B" are the only alternatives, and both can't be true: if one is true, the other must be false. She must either reconcile them in some way or accept one while rejecting the other. What she cannot do is continue to hold both sets of beliefs.

The problem with cognitive dissonance is that a person cannot hold incompatible beliefs about a matter of vital importance without being in conflict with themselves. The result is confusion and turmoil, often accompanied by doubt, anxiety, and sometimes even worse. If the beliefs

in conflict are emotionally critical to one's life and sense of identity, then cognitive dissonance can lead to serious dysfunction. Later in Season Four, when Riley learns that his beloved mentor, teacher, and commander Maggie Walsh has not only tried to kill Buffy but has been drugging him and using him as a guinea pig in a diabolical plan to rule the world, he falls apart, unable to deal with the devastating implications of this knowledge ("Goodbye Iowa" 4.14). Fortunately for Buffy, Parker does not occupy the central role in her life that Maggie Walsh does for Riley. Nevertheless, Parker does have a hold over her. Despite her misgivings, she can't let him go. To deal with the conflict, she will have to find a coping strategy that will work.

For someone with cognitive dissonance, a number of coping strategies are available. One common strategy is to deny the conflict and try to rationalize or explain it away. A religious believer faced with the problem of evil can either deny that evil exists or claim that it is necessary for soul-making and freedom of the will. An alcoholic or opioid addict in denial can try to convince himself that he is just a social drinker or occasional user who can quit anytime. A woman who is the victim of "battered person syndrome" (BPS) may still believe her partner "loves" her and that the violence is either her fault or an anomalous episode that won't be repeated. This is the first coping strategy Buffy uses. Like the victim of BPS, Buffy suggests both to Parker and Willow that Parker's behavior is really her fault, and if she can just discover the reason, Parker will come back. But this rationalization cannot be sustained, because if Buffy is at fault, she doesn't know why, and each time she sees Parker, he is with a new girl. Another common strategy is simply to ignore the conflict. This is precisely what Buffy does in "Fear Itself" (4.4). Upon seeing Parker in the school cafeteria with yet another girl, she walks out, unable and unwilling to deal with the situation, telling Willow that she is "taking a holiday from dealing" and "vacationing in the land of not coping" (00:05:46-50). Of course, this strategy does not resolve the

conflict, but it does provide a brief respite from her emotional turmoil and conflict.

A third coping strategy is not to deny, rationalize, or ignore the conflict, but to take action to bring about change that will resolve the conflict. Instead of leaving the relationship, a BPS victim will try to work it out with her victimizer, perhaps assisted by counseling and therapy, hoping he will see how much she loves him, feel guilty, and reform his violent ways. An alcoholic will join AA in the hope of gaining enough strength to stay on the wagon. An opioid user will seek drug counseling and group help to stay drug-free. This is Buffy's hope in the opening scenes of "Beer Bad," as she sits in Maggie Walsh's psychology class daydreaming of saving Parker's life from a trio of bloodthirsty vampires, whereupon he apologizes for his actions and begs her forgiveness. The point of the fantasy is that if only Parker can see how much Buffy cares for him (by risking her life to save his), he will realize how insensitive he was and come back to her. Ironically, as unrealistic as this daydream is (Parker is in fact unredeemable), much of it will come true at the end of "Beer Bad." Buffy will save Parker's life, and he will beg for forgiveness, but by then, the event will have a very different meaning for her. Later, walking with Willow and Xander, Buffy wonders if Parker has "intimacy problems because of the death of his father" (00:06:17-19) but still holds out hope that he will change and come back to her. The problems with this strategy are obvious: it is based on wishful thinking, not on evidence. For the BPS victim, this will backfire and lead to further violence and even death unless the victimizer changes. For the alcoholic or opioid user, it will backfire unless he or she has the will power and inner strength to see it through. For Buffy, the strategy will fail because her fantasy is completely unrealistic. His intimacy problems notwithstanding, Parker has no desire to change because he fails to see anything wrong or immoral in his treatment of women, or if he does, he doesn't care. Moreover, it is doubtful that he could change even if he wanted to. Parker is a narcissist

and misogynist who sees women as objects of conquest, as trophies, and not as persons of equal worth.⁸ Such a radical change would require a profound transformation of character, and this will not happen magically overnight, if at all.

What we see in Buffy's coping strategies is an evolution from denial to avoidance to possible action and false hope. To resolve the conflict, she needs to take one more step and accept the fact that "B" is true and "A" is false and act accordingly. But it will not be enough to see Parker for what he really is; she will also need to break her strong emotional attachment to him. The first breakthrough finally comes early in "Beer Bad" when Buffy sees Parker kissing yet another would-be victim in the campus pub where Xander has landed a bartending job. This is the proverbial last straw. Sitting at the bar across from Xander, she unloads the weight she has been carrying for days: "Parker's problem with intimacy turns out he can't get enough of it, and I know it. I knew what he was. If he were tied and gagged and left in a cave that vampires happen to frequent, it wouldn't really be like I killed him, really? I'm a slut, idiot!" (00:10:23-46)

If it were up to the Greek philosopher Plato, once Buffy has this insight into Parker's character, her conflict will be resolved and his hold over her broken. For Plato, once a person truly sees and understands the facts, she will know what to do and act accordingly, and weakness of the will is an illusion. Doing the right thing is a matter of knowledge and understanding and not a matter of overcoming countervailing emotions and desires. But Plato is mistaken.⁹ As struggles against alcoholism and other forms of addiction show, weakness of the will is very real, requiring enormous amounts of will power to overcome contrary feelings and desires.¹⁰ Like the BPS victim who finally sees the batterer for what he really is but still must break free of her emotional dependence on him, Buffy has to do the same, or she will never be free of Parker.

But how do we know that Buffy's epiphany in the pub, though critical to her liberation, has not destroyed her emotional attachment to Parker? In other words, how do we know that Plato's analysis is not correct in Buffy's case? The answer is found in the subtle placement of two events shortly after Buffy's eureka moment. As she is leaving the pub, she is stopped by four college guys who invite her to join them for a beer. While mulling over the invitation, she spots Parker leaving with the same girl probably on the way to his dorm room for sex, whereupon she immediately accepts the invitation. The placement of these two scenes in immediate succession suggests that, far from being accidental, they are causally related. In other words, Buffy does not accept the invitation because she is charmed by four strangers, but because she's not over Parker and wants to drown her sorrow in beer. If she were over Parker and had some other reason for accepting the invitation, the inclusion of the previous scene (Buffy seeing him leaving with another conquest) would be unnecessary. This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that Buffy doesn't leave the pub after one drink but has to be ushered out by Xander after drinking herself into stupefaction and then returns the following day to resume her binge with her new drinking buddies. This point is critical to understanding the rest of the narrative in "Beer Bad," because if Buffy hasn't severed completely the emotional ties with Parker, then her transformation into the Cave Slayer has a deeper and more important meaning than comedic hi-jinx or simple revenge.

Cave Slayer

Over a period of two nights interrupted by a day of classes, Buffy and her drinking pals consume a huge amount of Black Frost, as they gradually transform into primitive Neanderthals. What they don't know and is left to Xander to discover is that the Black Frost has been laced

with a demon potion by the pub's manager that eventually turns the guys into wild cave men and Buffy into the Cave Slayer. When Xander realizes what has happened, he and Giles rush to Buffy's dorm room to find her drawing cave paintings on the wall while muttering "Parker bad" (00:30:53). To their utter amazement, Buffy has been transformed into a primitive and feral Cave Slayer with fierce eyes encircled by dark shadows, wild unkempt hair, and a simian-like gait. Unlike her male cohorts, who can only grunt and gesture, Buffy has retained a modicum of linguistic ability, communicating her wants and needs in truncated sentences like "Buffy want beer" (00:33:50) and "Parker bad." Divested of all the trappings of modern life and culture, she has de-evolved into a creature ruled by appetite and impulse.

What is the point of this narrative device? Is it merely a comedic tool designed to entertain and bring satisfying closure (for Buffy and the viewer) to a bad relationship? Or is it something more? We need to look deeper, since something more subtle and important is going on here. Beyond just slapstick entertainment, Buffy's de-evolution into the Cave Slayer accomplishes two things: first, it sheds new light on something we already knew or at least suspected about Buffy's identity, and second, it allows her to break her emotional dependence on Parker and finally put an end to the conflict plaguing her in these early episodes of Season Four.

In the opening scene of "Beer Bad" sandwiched between Buffy's two daydreams, Professor Walsh endorses the Freudian view of the self that seems apropos of Buffy and her drinking pals later in the episode:

These are the things we want. Simple things—comfort, sex, shelter, and food. We always want them, and we want them all the time. The Id doesn't learn. It doesn't grow up. It has the ego telling it what it can't have, and it has the superego telling it what it shouldn't want, but the Id works solely out of the pleasure principle. It wants.

Whatever social skills we've learned, however much we've evolved, the pleasure principle is at work in all of us. (00:01:35-02:03)

When Buffy's drinking pals de-evolve into grunting cave men, they are ruled solely by the pleasure principle, wilding through campus, attacking people and destroying property, and terrorizing and kidnapping some women students, whom they bring back to the pub. The same seems to be true initially of Buffy when, at Xander's mention of beer in her dorm room, she utters "Buffy want beer...want beer!", pushes Giles to the floor, and makes a dash for the pub. Then something unexpected happens that gives the lie to Professor Walsh's (and Freud's) claim that at our core, our deepest level (the Id), we are all governed by the blind and selfish pursuit of pleasure. Spying smoke coming from the pub, Buffy mutters "fire bad" (00:36:17), runs to investigate, and sees Willow on the floor clubbed unconscious by the cave men. Leaping over a wall of fire, she manages to open a window and carry Willow to safety, which in turn allows the cavemen and their female captives to escape the flames as well. After saving Willow, she returns to the smoke-filled pub at great risk to herself to look for more students, and who does she find but Parker Abrams, also a victim of the wilding cavemen, now dazed and trapped by the fire. Instead of leaving him there to die, as she had fantasized earlier in the pub, she clubs him unconscious and carries him to safety.

What are we to make of this? A clue comes from "Helpless" (3.12) in Season Three. Fearful that Angel won't love her because she has lost her Slayer powers, Buffy asks him, "If I'm not the Slayer, what do I do? What do I have to offer? Why would you like me?" To which Angel replies, "I saw you before you became the Slayer. I watched you, and I saw you called. It was a bright afternoon out in front of your school. You walked down the steps, and I loved you." When Buffy asks why, Angel says, "because I saw your heart" (00:19:47-20:23). When Buffy is called as the Slayer, she is infused with greater strength, power, speed, and agility,

but not with greater insight, knowledge, or moral character.¹¹ If becoming a Slayer did involve acquiring a good moral character, Faith would not have betrayed her calling as a Slayer and gone over to the dark side. Whatever moral sentiments Buffy has, she has in virtue of being Buffy Summers and not the Slayer, and even when she has de-evolved into a cave girl, she shows a fierce loyalty to friends and a desire to help others, even those who have wronged and hurt her deeply. What this shows is what Angel has known all along: that at the deepest recesses of her being are powerful altruistic feelings and inclinations that have nothing to do with the pursuit of pleasure and self-interest. This is not a claim about human nature but about Buffy's nature. If you and I had undergone the same de-evolution as Buffy and her cohorts, many of us would probably lack these moral sentiments and behave just like the four cave men, but not all of us, and not Buffy. Whether the result of nature or nurture or both, these powerful altruistic feelings and moral sentiments lie at the core of who she is.

Equally if not more important, Buffy's de-evolution into the Cave Slayer allows her finally to break the emotional cord with Parker. After she saves Parker's life, he apologizes for the way he has treated her and begs her forgiveness. Improbable though it may be, Buffy's daydreams in class have come true, but with an ironic twist. Buffy is not listening. No longer able to excuse or rationalize his behavior, to create and obsess over false memories, or to imagine a different and better future, she glares at him and clubs him unconscious a second time. Clubbing Parker isn't an act of revenge or retribution but the final stage of an exorcism in which Buffy purges him from her system.

In "Hush," Joss Whedon uses the loss of speech to show how Buffy and Riley become aware of the other's secret identity, and in "Beer Bad," Tracey Forbes uses Buffy's transformation into the Cave Slayer to show how she purges herself of Parker. The irony in both cases is obvious. Just as Buffy and Riley are able to communicate to each other only when

they lose the power of speech, so Buffy is able to destroy Parker's power over her only when she sheds the psychological and emotional traps belonging to the "higher" reflexive and analytical self. When Buffy is transformed into the Cave Slayer, she refers to herself in the third person ("Buffy want beer!", "Buffy strong!", and "Buffy get beer!") and not in the first person "I." The "I" has vanished. She is no longer capable of the kind of self-doubt and self-deception that have made her so miserable. As the Cave Slayer, she still has some measure of insight, reason, and good judgment (unlike her drinking buddies), and is not completely at the mercy of the pleasure principle, but she is no longer able to preserve her emotional attachment to Parker with the cunning strategies of this more sophisticated reflexive self. Once this capability is lost, she can no longer excuse, rationalize, or fantasize his behavior, and Parker's hold over her is destroyed. The truth is right there in front of her eyes, and all she needs to do is see it unfiltered by the mind-traps that have caused her so much pain and confusion. Or to put the same point in another way: the demon brew allows her to stop overthinking and overanalyzing her relationship to Parker and follow her gut knowledge.

The Cave Slayer is both an ironic device that brings closure to the Buffy-Parker narrative arc and a metaphor that helps us better understand Buffy's conflict and the way to resolve it. The irony, of course, is that while Buffy's transformation into the Cave Slayer appears to be a de-evolution and regression, in fact it is the opposite. If it does function as a *Deus ex machina*, it does so in a benign and unobjectionable way. It's not that Buffy can't resolve the conflict by herself without the demon brew. In her conversation with Xander just before the drinking invitation, she has almost resolved it, and in time, would have done so on her own. The demon brew has simply sped up the process. This suggests that the real significance of the Cave Slayer, apart from its obvious comedic function (after all, "Beer Bad" is a comedy), is to shed light on the origin, nature, and resolution of Buffy's conflict. This should not be surprising. If we

know anything about the function of comedy in *Buffy*, it is that it never stands alone, but is always layered with meaning and connections to the larger narrative.

Final Thoughts

One of the major themes running throughout Season Four is dissemblance and the threat it poses to Buffy and her friends, especially when it conceals the malignant intentions of a dangerous enemy like Maggie Walsh or Adam or Faith. Of all these cases of deceit, at least ten in all,¹² none causes her more pain and is more difficult to handle than that of Parker, even though the actual danger posed by Parker is minimal. If there is a lesson in all of this, it is that appearances can be and often are deceiving, a lesson that will be repeated and reinforced throughout Season Four. There is another lesson here, but Buffy is still too naïve and uncritical with respect to her own social conditioning to see it: namely, that the search for “Mr. Right” and the huge emotional investment it requires belongs to a traditional self-image of femininity that she will have to overthrow to become fully whole and autonomous. She will do this in Season Seven, but only after much travail. Later in Season Four and still searching for “Mr. Right,” Buffy will begin a relationship with Riley Finn, but only after she is convinced by his actions and not his words that he genuinely cares for her (“Doomed” 4.11). Though not a predator like Parker, Riley has his own demons that will sabotage their relationship. As “Beer Bad” ends, Buffy is a lot wiser but has a long way to go before she can unite her human and Slayer sides and be her own person.

Notes

¹ The reader can see the large volume of disapproval by just googling “Buffy Beer Bad” or some variation thereof. Several that caught my eye were Sarah Bunting at *vulture.com*, Katherine Webb and Jeremy Martin at *screenrant.com*, J.A. Myrick at *cbr.com*, “Why does Everyone Hate

Beer Bad?” at *reddit.com*, and Noel Murray at *tv.avclub.com*. Among those that rank “Beer Bad” as the worst episode in the *Buffy* corpus are Erenberg at *slayage.com* and Grady et al. at *vox.com*. Despite this pervasive disapproval, there are still some dissenters on the internet who have enjoyed specific aspects of the show, especially Buffy’s transformation into the Cave Slayer and Willow’s rebuff and putdown of Parker.

² See Daniel Forbes, “Prime-time Propaganda” in *Salon Magazine* at *Salon.com*.

³ See the “Controversy” section of “Beer Bad” in Wikipedia. This was uploaded by a contributor named “Norvy” on 24 September 2005, who cites the website *freerepublic.com* as the source of the information. This website no longer exists, and this particular source has not been archived. Though not necessarily the uploader’s intention, the phrasing of this statement implies that the Whedon crew knew beforehand that the script would be submitted to the government for approval. I can find no evidence to support this inference.

⁴ This is not to say that propaganda in video or film cannot have artistic qualities or even be considered by some as a work of art. The classic example is Leni Riefenstahl’s controversial film *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*).

⁵ The information in the next two paragraphs is public knowledge but is summarized nicely in Forbes.

⁶ Even some *Buffy* scholars have taken the metaphor literally. See Stevenson, pp. 180-181.

⁷ See Jowett, Chapter 5.

⁸ Further evidence of Parker’s misogyny is found in “The Initiative” (4.7), when Riley and his friends are in the student lounge, and Forrest asks Parker for his opinion about Buffy. After describing her as “whiny,” “clingy,” and “a bunny in the sack,” Parker jokingly asks Riley and his friends, “You know the difference between a freshman girl and a toilet seat?”, and when no reply is forthcoming, he says, “A toilet seat doesn’t follow you around when you use it” (00:10:44-11:15), whereupon Riley punches him out with a hard right to the jaw. This exchange also shows that Parker’s plea for forgiveness at the end of “Beer Bad” is just another insincere attempt at manipulation.

⁹ A defender of Plato could argue that the alleged counterexamples do not show weakness of will but a lack of true knowledge and understanding on the part of the agent. If Buffy truly and fully understands Parker’s motivation and character and her own strategies of denial, then she will be emotionally free of him. The problem with this reply is that it makes Plato’s denial of weakness of the will empirically unfalsifiable and a metaphysical dogma instead of a claim based on evidence.

¹⁰ [Editor’s note: The role of will in the context of addiction is debated.]

¹¹ This is confirmed in Buffy’s conversation with the Shadow Men in “Get It Done” (7.15).

¹² In Season Four, in addition to that of Parker, Buffy has to deal with the deception of the vampire gang in “The Freshman” (4.1), her roommate Cathy in “Living Conditions” (4.2), Riley in “The Initiative” (4.7) through “Doomed” (4.11), Ethan Rayne in “A New Man” (4.12), Maggie Walsh in “The I in Team” (4.13), Faith in “Who Are You?” (4.16), Jonathan in “Superstar” (4.17), Adam and Spike in “The Yoko Factor” (4.20) and “Primeval” (4.21), and the First Slayer in “Restless” (4.22). With the exception of Faith’s treachery exposed by Tara

in “Who Are You?” and Riley’s self-revelation in “Hush,” Buffy uncovers the deception in each case through a keen awareness of clues inadvertently provided by the deceivers themselves.

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