

The Greatest Love of All: Cordelia's journey of self-discovery

Janet K. Halfyard

Cordelia Chase is one of the least talked about principal characters in the Buffyverse. There are a number of possible reasons for this: her season one character is frequently funny but almost irredeemably unpleasant, and consistently presented as self-obsessed to the point of vacuousness (e.g. in the fourth episode, "Teacher's Pet", she has trauma counseling after having discovered the decapitated body of her science teacher, but she is more interested in the fact that the shock of seeing a dead body caused her to lose almost half a pound, effacing and trivializing the fact that it was shock that caused her to lose her appetite). In season two, her relationship with Xander is a major factor in rehabilitating her, but season three sees her in an oddly comic and ultimately abortive would-be relationship with Wesley, the awkwardness of his character's place in the narrative underlining the awkwardness of her own as Xander's ex: both she and Wesley are slightly surplus to requirements. It is not until she appears in *Angel* that Cordelia's character really starts to develop, and in general much less has been written about *Angel* than has been about *BtVS*.

However, in much the same way that Willow undergoes enormous transformations in the course of *BtVS*, so too Cordelia's character undergoes some very significant transformations across both series. This paper examines what becomes of Cordelia, as she metamorphosizes from High School Prom princess to seer and scion of the powers that be, and the extent to which her transformation is plotted against the conflicts that occur between her need to be loved, her ambition to be an actress, and her desire to do good and find a purpose for her life.

The original construction of Cordelia's character is full of apparent ironies that hint at what she is to become a few years later. In the same way that Buffy Summers' name, with her first name's assonant and alliterative references to fluffy and bunny, suggests a trivial, sunny childishness that contrasts starkly with the nocturnal demands of being a Vampire Slayer, Cordelia Chase is a name with several hidden messages. Cordelia is most famous as Shakespeare's heroine who demonstrates her love by utter truthfulness and sincerity, and by a refusal to flatter in order to gain favor from others; and the name means "warm-hearted", evidently chosen by Shakespeare to indicate that his heroine is truly good. Sunnydale's Cordelia could not be more different: in *BtVS* season one she is self-obsessed, extremely cruel to Willow, Xander and anyone else she perceives to be a loser, all of which might be interpreted as an ironic equivalent of the Shakespearean Cordelia's unrelenting honesty, but in

“Homecoming” (season three) she unequivocally uses insincere flattery as part of her drive to be elected Homecoming Queen.

But her surname, Chase, also carries meanings. Just as Buffy’s surname connects her to Sunnydale and Willow’s first name connects her to nature and wicca, so Cordelia’s name implies that she is not settled, that she is questing after something else, a character in flight, in pursuit of her dreams.

One of Cordelia’s defining characteristics is her apparent enjoyment of performing. It must be admitted that before moving to LA, she shows little real sign of being seriously interested in acting, and her family’s change of financial fortunes, preventing her from going to university, is probably an important factor in her adoption of a career for which one needs little formal qualification. However, we do see her perform on one occasion in *BtVS*. “The Puppet Show,” towards the end of season one, centers on the school talent show in which all the principal-character students take part. Cordelia is seen singing “The Greatest Love of All” - which, of course, is “learning to love yourself”, an ironic yet revealing comment on the vain and largely self-obsessed character of Cordelia in the first season of *BtVS*. She clearly believes herself to be quite talented whereas in fact she is out of tune and has an awkward stage presence in marked contrast to her off-stage sophistication [example: Cordelia singing]

However, performance in the Buffyverse has an unusual positioning, and as I discussed in the hopefully soon to be published *Monsters and Metaphors* collection, failure by principal characters to perform well is usually a sign that we can trust someone (Giles is a special case – I discuss him in the essay but I’m not going to discuss him here). Characters working for the forces of good tend to find it impossible to don the mask of the performer effectively: all performance is potentially a form of deception, of pretending to be something one is not, of not being sincere or honest. Cordelia (like Buffy) cannot perform well on stage but, in the same way that Buffy practices her one-liners and wisecracks in the field, so Cordelia does manage to pull off a believable performance in the field when lives are in danger in the episode “Eternity” in *Angel* season one when she is confronted by a temporarily, drug-induced evil Angel, this being directly contrasted with her appalling performance as Hedda Gabler at the top of the same episode. However, as stage performers and singers, they suck. All the other forces-of-good characters tend to be extremely aware when their performances are bad, but the rehabilitation of Cordelia’s character seems to go hand in hand with her growing awareness that she is not cut out for the performing life. In “Eternity”, she is still unaware of the dreadfulness of her

acting in *Hedda Gabler* and still determined to pursue her career as an actress, but the gift and curse of her visions is a significant factor in changing her. This process is first made apparent in the *Angel* Season One finale, when she is made aware of the sheer amount of suffering in the world, an awakening that almost destroys her. Then, in Seasons Two and Three, Cordelia's development as a character is played out as a confrontation between Cordelia the performer and Cordelia the seer.

Cordelia is unique in the Buffyverse as the only principal character who actively wants to be a star. Oz is the only other character who comes close to this desire, and he is content as a guitarist and backing vocalist in a high school band. Cordelia wants to be an actress: she wants to be on stage with everybody's eyes upon her. She wants to perform. By extension, one might suspect that she wants to be someone else, someone whom the audience will love, because they could not possibly love her for herself. Cordelia's character is complex. She is far from stupid, as her multiple acceptances by good universities demonstrates in *BtVS* Season Three; and she is not as shallow as she almost wilfully appears - her feelings for Xander and her pain over his infidelity are entirely genuine, although she attempts to conceal this, compared to Harmony's inability to perceive Spike's true feelings for her, let alone have any deeper feelings for him beyond her own sense of the status he gives her (*BtVS* Season Four). Cordelia has clearly been spoilt in material terms, but there are considerable hints that she has been neglected emotionally, and more or less abandoned by her family after her parents' falling out with the IRS. There are also indications that she suffers from low self-esteem: the constant battle to maintain her popularity at the expense of more meaningful relationships in High School, and her attempt to escape from herself through acting, willing to submit to what she believes to be Russell Winter's casting couch in the opening episode of *Angel* Season One. Cordelia rarely allows herself a chance to be sincere in *BtVS* seasons one and three, or in the opening episodes of *Angel* as she is far too busy maintaining the illusion of her invulnerability, an illusion so complete that she cannot see through it to the truth that she is not, at this point, a particularly good actress. The belief in herself as a future star performer is a substitute for present-tense self-esteem and hence it must be maintained.

However, Season Two of *Angel* uses this aspect of Cordelia's personality to demonstrate her development and the radical changes she undergoes. [example: Season 2 teaser] The very first episode of Season Two locates the karaoke bar and acts of performance at the centre of the overall Season narrative. Cordelia is apparently doing very well at her actors' workshop and she practically exits to the

line “Focus on how conflicted you...”, this comment highlighting the conflict between her two lives, and, as with Caritas, foregrounding it is a theme that will run through the entire Season.

The final episode of the season begins with a “previously on *Angel*” segment, the first clip of which comes from (episode 18), the last occasion on which we saw Cordelia in her role as performer, being resoundingly humiliated during the recording of a commercial [example]. The use of this clip as part of the teaser for the Season Two finale is, in terms of establishing the sequence of events, completely irrelevant; but in terms of Cordelia’s development, it is essential that we should be reminded of Cordelia as the performer who craves the love of an adoring audience. When she is sucked through the vortex into Pylea, her dreams of being a star are suddenly realized when she is made princess and ruler. In contrast to the humiliation of her last acting experience, now she is lavished with the kind of luxury associated with Hollywood’s golden age narratives: a gothic mansion-like home, exotic clothing, jewelry and servants. In effect, the dreams of Cordelia the performer have come true: she can play at being the adored star for as long as she wants, complete with the obligatory gorgeous co-star boyfriend, Gru.

Then, however, she learns the truth of the arrangement: “I knew there had to be a catch”, she says. She learns that Gru’s role is to take her visions away from her, and here the conflict between her two roles is brought into sharp relief. To retain her visions, she must give up the starring role she has landed, but the choice would appear to be a surprisingly easy one to make:

Cordelia: You can’t take my visions. I need them. I use them to help my friends fight evil back home.... I can’t give up my visions - I like them. OK, so I don’t like the searing pain and agony that is steadily getting worse...but I’m not ready to give them up either...they’re a part of who I am now. They’re an honor.

Her reasons for wanting to keep her visions are as important as the fact that she is willing to give up being the princess: her reasons for wanting to be the princess are the self-indulgent and attention-seeking reasons that attract her to performance in general. Her reasons for wanting to keep the visions are altruistic and humble, a remarkably far cry for the Cordelia who once sang her way tunelessly through “The Greatest Love of All.”

In Season Three, the conflict between performance and Cordelia’s growing sense of moral responsibility is again made explicit. The visions are threatening to kill her: as Gru revealed in Season Two, humans were not made to be able to withstand such things. In “Birthday,” she reaches the end of her ability to survive them, but it appears the Powers that Be offer her a chance to live by rewriting

history and preventing her meeting with Angel at the fateful party that brought them together in Season One, episode one. Not unlike her chance at being the princess in Pylea, here she is offered the acting career of her dreams, a life as a nationally-loved television star: but it seems that the changes that have been made to her character by the visions in the original version of history cannot be erased. She may have been taken to a reality where none of the events of Seasons One or Two have occurred, but her character's development has remained intact. Thus, when she is confronted with what has happened to Angel and Wesley in this version of reality, she is again forced into a moral choice and again does not hesitate: she asks to be made part demon, takes back her visions and rejects the other life she was offered as a performer.

This conflict between her two possible lives again raises the issue of performance and sincerity as mutually opposed propositions in the Buffyverse. By rejecting performance in favour of the visions, Cordelia chooses service, altruism and engagement with the real, difficult world of the Buffyverse over the potential deceptions of performing, its false glamour, its illusions and artifice. Rejecting performance, she becomes more credible as an agent for the Powers that Be, and ultimately more sincerely loveable for herself than as the adored star (i.e. "loved" by thousands who do not know her at all) she once wanted to be. In many respects, by rejecting performance and illusion she becomes much more like Buffy herself. Both are chosen ones, chosen by mystical forces and given a gift with which to serve the world; both have to give up their childish dreams of the lives they expected to lead in order to do this; both have to give up some of their literal humanity in order to serve humankind better. Cordelia becomes part demon in order to continue with her visions, while Buffy comes back from heaven in order to keep saving the world with her humanness altered such that she is no longer protected from Spike by his chip. Both are also offered an alternative reality that might well be easier to live in than the one they are currently in, Cordelia in "Birthday," *Angel* season 3 and Buffy in "Normal Again" in *BtVS* season 6, running parallel to this season of *Angel*.

In *Angel* season 4, we lose Cordelia: for the second time, a major and much loved character was written out of the series in a way that left viewers in denial –surely she, surely Doyle, would return, this could not be the end. But, to all intents and purposes, it was: and in retrospect, we can see that Cordelia's journey is framed by her two renditions of the same song: shortly before she is possessed by evil, she sings the opening line of "The Greatest Love of All" as badly as ever, for Lorne to read her. By recalling the song, as in the following episode where all the characters revert to the age of 17, we

are invited to remember her as she was in BtVS season one, and to marvel at the changes in her, the distance that her character has covered, making it all the more tragic when we lose her soon after.

At the end of season four, Cordelia's position is left in considerable doubt, and all her character's achievements appear entirely undermined. Her assumption into a higher dimension appears to have been a deception, and her return leaves her first possessed by evil and then consigned to a coma. However, her final appearance in season five, in episode 100, "You're welcome" is a final vindication of the true Cordelia, who returns for one last time, to save Angel and put him back on the right track before we discover that she has died.

We are left in no doubt about her own transformation, and the utter sincerity of her decision, made not once but twice, to give up her dreams of being a star. Those dreams were based on a deep insecurity and a need for attention and validation. Through her participation in fighting the good fight, her forced transformation into the seer of the powers that be and her voluntary transformation into their warrior, she learned to love herself and to serve the greater good.