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Happiness is a Warm Scythe: The Evolution of Villainy and Weaponry in the Buffyverse



[1] "Candles? We can't have candles?" Dawn complains in the Season Six episode following "Wrecked" (6.10), in which Willow, black-eyed and high on the magics, fractures Dawn's arm in a car accident. Buffy explains to Dawn that "to you and me they're just candles, but to witches they're like bongos" ("Gone," 6.11). Thus Willow's increasing inclination toward and dependence on spells for both problem solving and recreation is tied down firmly to the metaphor of drug addiction.^[11] In earlier episodes she and the freshly de-ratted Amy visit the concealed establishment of Rack, a warlock whose spells "last for days" ("Wrecked"). Inside his run-down shack, complete with sagging, mismatched furniture, stained wallpaper and crooked blinds, not to mention hollow-eyed, strung-out customers waiting their turn, Willow writhes on the ceiling, occasionally opening her eyes to the blooming, psychedelic shapes below her, courtesy of Rack's spell. Amy, meanwhile, spins blearily in a circle. "You taste like strawberries," Rack breathes into Willow's ear when the two first meet, as she sways unsteadily before him, eyes glassy and dilated. Yikes?

[2] It is difficult to find fans of this particular story arc of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Where, after all, are the vampires, monsters or demons that might save such a disappointingly mundane series of episodes from total obscurity? Where are Willow's characteristically self-conscious slips of the tongue as she tries to explain another spell gone awry? Where are Buffy, Xander and Giles—the core group whose members have, time and again, succeeded in saving each other from themselves? What is at stake in an episode like "Wrecked" (6.10), and are viewers truly meant to take its obvious, unoriginal, not to mention dated, *Just Say No* moral to heart? At best, isn't "Wrecked" a weak, ultimately forgettable story? At worst, an insult to the loyal *Buffy* fan's intelligence?

[3] Perhaps, but then again, every truly loyal fan is also a critic, and examining even the most disappointing episodes of striking programs like *Buffy* more deeply can reward viewers with an improved understanding of the series as a whole. Season Six was a low point for many *Buffy* fans, full as it was of disintegrating or dysfunctional relationships: Xander jilts Anya, Willow betrays Tara, and Buffy and Spike begin their secret sexual affair that culminates in attempted rape. What's more, the season lacks the awe-inspiring Big Bad whose sinister apocalyptic scheme usually functions to (re)unite the core group. But beyond even these distinctive features, there is something fundamentally different about the season's storytelling, specifically its representation of the relationship between the supernatural and the mundane.

[4] Episodes from early seasons of *Buffy* immediately set up a tension between the supernatural and the ordinary. Many critics have commented on the central High-School-is-Hell metaphor of the opening seasons. In *Buffy* this metaphor is literalized; she fights monster versions of common teenage problems: "Internet predators are demons; drink-doctoring frat boys have sold their souls for success in the business world; a girl who has sex with even the nicest-seeming male discovers that he afterwards becomes a monster" (Wilcox 1). Surface supernatural plots succeed in seeming always familiar; some real-life connection consistently lurks in the background, though the fantasy element unsurprisingly takes center stage. Xander may remind us of a typically careless, callous teenage boy in "The Pack" (1.6), but he's also been possessed by the spirit of a vicious hyena. Thus the common teenage problem plot, while relevant, is purposely and inevitably overwhelmed by the monster plot. Not so for Season Six, in which the current begins flowing the other way; the magical pours into the mundane until, ultimately, the two reach an indistinguishable equilibrium. Such a symmetry must be remarked on for what it reveals about *Buffy's* impressive interpretation and illustration of contemporary society—real people acting in a real world. Indeed, as the program matures, so does its understanding of the relationship—and in particular the spatial relationship—between real people and what is truly threatening about the world they live in. The shift in storytelling in this penultimate season paves the way for the extraordinary direction of Season Seven, in which the boundaries between the occult and the everyday, seemingly reasserted with the reintroduction of the First, are in fact thinner than they've ever been. The First Evil, of all *Buffy's* major villains, translates most accessibly from the fiction of the Buffyverse to the menacing, potentially devouring aspects of postmodern consumer culture. Fredric Jameson, in his famed essay, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," discusses postmodernism as a historical and therefore all-encompassing phenomenon, a new space that immerses us all to the point where "our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation" (48-49). The "once-existing centered subject," Jameson suggests, "has today in the world of organizational bureaucracy dissolved" (15). In its place? A "high-tech paranoia" that tries and fails to "think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (38). From all around you, it devours.

[5] *Buffy* Season Seven is a long attempt to think the impossible totality, but before this process can occur—before indeed we can grasp the emotional resonance of the collective "you" in the First Evil's personal mantra alluded to above—Season Six must first set up the new space the First will arrive to fill.

[6] Willow's addiction storyline is one of the preliminary steps in the process of closing the gap between the magical and the mundane and thus creating this new space; there are additional examples throughout the season of one-to-one correlations that similarly smother the distance between surface-happenings and background-hints. The Trio, for example, are not Supervillains who remind us of Nerds—they *are* Nerds, and in fact they are Nerds before they are villains, just as Willow is an addict before she is a witch, and just as Buffy is a girl with a death wish before she is a slayer who has potentially "come back wrong" as a result of Willow's resurrection spell. As Tara is able to prove to her in "Dead Things" (6.13), Buffy did not in fact "come back wrong"; she is simply still traumatized by the experience of being ripped out of heaven. Hers is a perfectly natural, normal response to a great physical and psychological shock. Though Roz Kaveney may go a bit too far in her identification of the Season's central metaphor—i.e., that "growing up feels like leaving Heaven" (31)—it is certainly the case that the world around Buffy seems more dark, more threatening, and less like Heaven than it has previously seemed, even in similarly dark seasons like the second and fifth. It is not just the difficult process of growing up, however, that is being symbolized here. Arguably Buffy has been "grown up" since the earliest episodes of the series. Her financial woes, parenting responsibilities and

her efforts to find gainful employment are significant obstacles in the season, yet they pale in comparison to Buffy's principal dilemma—her despair. As Buffy herself says, "the hardest thing in this world is to live in it," not just to grow up in it ("The Gift," 5.22). Up until the final moments of the season finale, Buffy despairs over nothing less than being alive, feeling once more incomplete and unfinished, estranged from a world that is "harsh, and bright and violent," where "everything is hard" ("After Life," 6.3), where "nothing is real / nothing is right" ("Once More With Feeling," 6.7).

[7] Life itself is Season Six's Big Bad, as Buffy struggles not with how to survive, but with wanting to. Hence the mundanity of life must be underlined: the Trio, the Doublemeat Palace, Dawn the kleptomaniac, and Warren the gun-wielding misogynist. It is indeed significant that the catalyst for the eventual reassertion of the supernatural via the materialization of Dark Willow, in the final episodes of the season, is none other than a gun, an entirely mundane, not at all supernatural weapon that anyone has the right to purchase and carry around.

[8] Of course, it is also significant that "anyone" in this case is Warren Mears, leader of the Trio, the "Little Bads" of Season Six who perfunctorily decide to "team up and take over Sunnydale" ("Flooded," 6.4). Throughout most of the Season their clumsy villainy is exaggerated, as when they stutteringly introduce themselves to Buffy as her "arch-nemesises^¼ees" ("Gone," 6.11). Given Season Six's emphasis on and elevation of the mundane, this exaggeration is necessary. However, the Trio's presumptuous, irreverent attitude toward Buffy's real power is not entirely surprising or necessarily out of place. Almost every major villain possesses some mundane attributes—the Master imitates Buffy's "feeble banter" ("Prophecy Girl," 1.12), Spike and Drusilla, according to the Judge, "stink of humanity" ("Surprise," 2.13), the Mayor is a germaphobe who reads *Family Circus*, Adam is of course made from actual human parts, and Glory shops at retail outlets, dyes her hair and reminds Buffy of Cordelia ("Family," 5.6). The final elevation of the mundane to the level of the supernatural is a move the series seems to have been preparing for from the beginning.

[9] Nothing, after all, has ever been sacred in *Buffy*, and, overshadowed as it tends to be, the mundane has always had its place. That much is obvious from the title alone, which links the "over-the-top girliness" (Pender 38) of the name *Buffy* with the violent title *Vampire Slayer*. The jarring effect instigated by the title is only enhanced inside the actual episodes, all of which make consistent use of a snappy, clever, casual dialogue that rarely dissipates, not even in the most dramatic, potentially horrifying scenes. According to J. Lawton Winslade, "clever phrase-turning" is part not so much of the jarring but of the blurring between the "everyday world and [the] occult world" (3) within which *Buffy's* characters are doubly immersed. "In the liminal space of Sunnydale," he suggests, ordinary "words take on magical properties both as powerful incantations and as weapons used by the teens to cope and gain power ^¼" (3). ^[21] Winslade perhaps overemphasizes Sunnydale's liminality in *Buffy's* earliest seasons, however, for the language used by individual characters in Seasons One through Three reflects less the blurring between the everyday and the occult, more the distinctions between the two. Consider Oz's telling comment in the following scene from "Graduation Day" (3.21), in which Willow, frustrated that she cannot find a useful spell to fight the mayor, complains:

Willow: Oh, this is frustrating. Oz: Nothing useful? Willow: No, it's great ^¼ if we want to make ferns invisible, or communicate with shrimp, I've got the goods right here. Oz: [Pauses] Our lives are different than other people's.

Oz's assertion here is a reminder that, in the early seasons of *Buffy*, the occult is perceived to exist in a far enough remove that even the members of Buffy's core group, seemingly in the thick of things, recognize the existence of a separate, exclusively

"normal" world where invisible ferns and communicative shrimp "are generally ruled out without even saying" ("Inca Mummy Girl," 2.4).

[10] This recognition is perhaps what enables the core group's notoriously anticlimactic, irreverent attitudes toward life or death situations, which they often successfully defuse by injecting a stubborn and comical normalcy. The Scoobies, as they come to be called, do in fact resemble members of an extracurricular Crime Club (their cover story in "Inca Mummy Girl"). Often their research sessions or patrolling outings turn into social occasions involving donuts, hot chocolate and/or dishing about relationships. Any vampires who show up are quickly dispatched, and the routine conversations resume. Of course, an even more immediate example of *Buffy's* embrace of the mundane is in the very existence of the core group that forms around Buffy in the first episode. Alone in her power, Buffy quickly befriends fellow students who become surprisingly adept at assisting her in her fight against the forces of evil. With little to no resistance Xander and Willow, and later Cordelia and Oz, immerse themselves in Buffy's magical world. They are given access to the supernatural elements that surround them and, less and less surprisingly, they do not balk. Oz's reaction to the first vampire he sees turn to dust after being staked provides a perfect example of the ease with which the supernatural is accepted: "Actually, it explains a lot" ("Surprise," 2.12).

[11] Access to the supernatural world, then, is never presented as particularly difficult in the Buffyverse. The Scoobies rarely have to take the time to prove to each other the feasibility of their supernatural explanations; any initial skepticism is quickly cleared away. More often than not, the persistent intrusions of supernatural plots into Buffy's quest for a "normal life" are treated as annoyances rather than crises. The important point is that the supernatural world is perceived in this particular way—as a separate world intruding on what would be a normal, stable world if it were only left alone. Aimee Fifarek explains that in these early seasons, "much of the show revolves around the battle for dominance between the supernatural and normal memes ¼ The battle is not over which one is true but rather which one will increase its survival value by spreading" (10). We see this "spreading" in episodes like "Graduation Day" (3.22), when the entire senior class is organized into an army to fight the mayor. Though Cordelia voices her skepticism—"I personally don't think it's possible to come up with a crazier plan"—the Scoobies do not seem to encounter too much resistance from their fellow classmates, all of whom agree (off-screen) to conceal axes, bows and arrows and, somewhat inconceivably, flamethrowers under their graduation robes.

[12] Fifarek points out that, in contrast to a show like *The X-Files*, where the mission is to expose the truth, in *Buffy* the truth is already exposed, and for people in the Buffyverse, it is not a matter of acknowledging whether magic exists, but a matter of moving beyond random acknowledgment and choosing to make magic a recognizable part of everyday life—not just Graduation Day. As Willow explains in "Choices" (3.19), "I think [fighting evil is] worth doing. And I don't think you do it because you have to. It's a good fight, Buffy, and I want in." All of the Scoobies decide they "want in," but if this is a choice that renders them outcasts every day in high school except the last, once they graduate Buffy and crew find they are far from alone in their "choice" to embrace the occult.

[13] Thus we arrive at Season Four, which introduces not only UC Sunnydale but the Initiative, the vast underground military-funded demon research facility located somewhere beneath the college campus. Four is also the season in which Willow becomes more heavily involved in magic, and where she meets Tara, another practicing witch. Many of the season's episodes center on magic and spell-casting, particularly the tendency for spells to go awry or to be somehow misused or misinterpreted. ^[3]A particularly relevant example is the alternative reality episode "Superstar" (4.17) in which Jonathan, a former fellow

classmate from Sunnydale High, casts an augmentation spell that transforms not only his life but the lives of everyone around him. Not only is Jonathan the new leader of Buffy's gang, he is also a bestselling author, swimsuit model, and star of the *Matrix*; he even hijacks the opening credits of the show. After Buffy puts things to rights, Jonathan explains how he discovered his world-changing spell in conversation with a nameless "kid" he met in a counseling session. Season Four makes it increasingly clear that many more "normal" people, totally unaffiliated with Buffy, are not merely accepting the existence of the supernatural, but embracing their access to it on a regular basis. [\[4\]](#)

[14] This embrace of access only widens to accommodate Season Five, the infamous season where Dawn appears at the end of the first episode, "Buffy vs. Dracula" (5.1). She is introduced inexplicably as Buffy's younger sister; not until the fifth episode do viewers finally discover that another world-changing spell has been cast. After saving a monk from "the Abomination," Glory, Buffy learns from him that all her memories of growing up with a sister have been built. Her initial response to this discovery is to demand that the monk "unbuild them." Her life, her memories have been violated, just as they were for Jonathan's spell—Buffy finds herself, once again, an actor in someone else's "sock puppet theater" ("Superstar," 4.17). This time, of course, the stakes are much higher, and Buffy cannot really consider undoing the spell. But the larger implication amidst the already large implications of the Season Five story arc is the uncomfortable possibility, even probability, that because magic is so prevalent, anyone at any time might become the victim of someone else's magic spell, and never know it. We've come a long way from Season Three's "Choices" (3.19), where Willow can say with confidence that fighting Evil is a choice, and that you don't do it "because you have to." By Season Five, those who live in the Buffyverse may not *have* to fight Evil, but they do have to acknowledge that the occult world and the everyday world are no longer distinct—they are one and the same. Dawn provides the perfect example of this lack of distinction—manipulated entirely by an anonymous group of brethren, she is a typical 14-year-old adolescent at the same time as she is a mystical ball of energy housed in a flesh and blood body that is only six months old. As the monk reminds Buffy, wistfully yet unapologetically, "She is an innocent in this" ("No Place Like Home," 5.5).

[15] Indeed, who isn't? In this remarkable episode, we see *Buffy* the series and Buffy the adult finally consider the daunting possibility that the normal world to which she always imagined retreating and the magical world to which she was called to fight have always been one and the same, have never been truly distinct. Magic hasn't finally found a foolproof way to intrude. Magic hasn't gotten smarter. Buffy has.

[16] In addition to introducing Dawn, Five is also the season in which Giles buys the magic shop; on the grand opening it is packed with shoppers buying any number of magical equipment for any number of innocent or sinister purposes. What his products might be used for does not seem to be a consistent concern of Giles'. [\[5\]](#) Given Sunnydale's reputation it is remarkable that no one, with the possible exception of the Council members in "Checkpoint" (5.12), ever pauses to consider the potentially catastrophic consequences of selling magic in a town like Sunnydale. [\[6\]](#) The explanation seems to be that since magic is everywhere, Giles might as well filter some of it through a retail shop in the hopes of turning a profit. No one comments on how this unlimited availability of magic effectively reduces the distance between the Slayer and the normal residents of Sunnydale she anonymously protects and defends. With the power she is a part of now public and indeed publicized, what happens to her status as a superhero?

[17] If it is Season Five that poses this question of the consequences of magic for the masses, it is Season Six that supplies an answer, and it is the Trio, the "Little Bads," who bring the issue to the forefront. Earlier villains such as the Master and Glory wished, quite simply, to overrun Buffy's world. Buffy's response, if not always easy to *carry* out,

was easy to *figure* out: save my world; destroy theirs. But Buffy's war with the Trio is unprecedented, for it cannot be ignored that she and they inhabit the same space. They live in the same town, attend the same schools, hang out in the same Bronze. Buffy thinks little of her new nemeses after their first meeting ("Gone," 6.111), but like the monks of Season Five, the Trio force Buffy to (re)consider another daunting truth—that she has been wrong from the beginning, that her calling as the Slayer isn't what has kept her from a normal life, and that normal life may in fact be possible for no one. Just look at the Trio, "called" to villainy over a board game. They lack any apocalyptic plans, desiring nothing more than to live out a few highly unoriginal fantasies. Fredric Jameson explains in *Postmodernism* the concept of "image addiction," which he says "transform[s] the past into visual mirages, stereotypes, or texts, effectively abolish[ing] any practical sense of the future and of the collective project, thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to fantasies ¼" (46). Warren, Jonathan and Andrew are introduced immediately as image addicts, immersed in popular culture to the point of total inundation (overdose); where they begin and the pop references end is a total mystery, and they are as oblivious to any collective project as blitzed-out Willow is when in the company of Amy and Rack. Certainly their evil schemes are not practical in terms of any overarching strategy. The boys have a perfunctory list of goals which they refer to as their "super-cool mission statement," and which includes training gorillas and "chicks, chicks, chicks" ("Flooded," 6.4). [\[7\]](#)

[18] However, though all the supernatural power the Trio have is borrowed, they manage to disorient Buffy throughout the season, arguably more than any other villain ever has. Critics like Lorna Jowett suggest it is the Trio's humanity that throws Buffy off her game. Warren, she argues, "does more damage to Buffy and the Scoobies than any other villain because he is *Ôreal*" (115). That said, it seems easy enough to draw the line between the mundane aspects of the Trio and their supernatural aspects: take away their magical equipment—the cerebral dampener, the invisibility ray, the magic bone, the demon-summoning pan-flute—and they are beaten. In "Seeing Red" (6.19), Buffy assumes Warren is effectively defeated after she smashes the magic orbs that have given him super-strength. Yet, as we have already seen throughout this season, the line between natural and supernatural is hardly distinct, if indeed it exists at all. Warren has convinced himself of his own superiority—that he is the villain in this story. Whether or not the latter is actually true ceases to matter, for Warren is close enough to magic to be a very real threat, regardless of whether he has his hands, so to speak, directly in it. This is the uncomfortable conclusion to which Season Six abandons us: the final moments of "Seeing Red" effectively eradicate any mappable distance between the magical and the mundane. Warren stalks into Buffy's backyard wielding a gun; he initially aims at Buffy before shooting wildly—Tara, hit by a stray bullet that comes through the window of Buffy's house, dies almost immediately, and in front of Willow. Literally seeing red, Willow allows the power she has been denying for so long to finally manifest itself. And Warren, regardless of his "aim," is responsible for bringing this power out of her. He disorientingly finds his way into Willow's supernatural power—the stray bullet symbolizes the wild and violent but ultimately confused path he takes to get there.

[19] Warren's weapon is particularly important in that it makes vivid the connection he and Willow share, not just as enemies, but as characters who share similar paths of development. Both Willow and Warren are typical-enough school nerds who, arguably, and by choice rather than fate or destiny, grow as powerful as the Slayer. Granted, both Warren and Willow are "super"-smart, but writers take special care to highlight their goofy ordinariness as much as their heightened intellectualism. Willow is hacking into secure websites by the first episode of the series, but she also has trouble talking to boys, wears clothes picked out by her mom, and appears to have never heard of the phrase, *carpe diem* ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1.1). Warren constructs a virtually indestructible fembot girlfriend, but he is also ludicrously protective of his Star Wars action figures

("Smashed," 6.9), and can't stop himself from entering a who-made-the-best-James-Bond argument with the hapless Jonathan and Andrew ("Life Serial," 6.5). Unusual as they are, there is enough of the typical and familiar in Warren and Willow that encourages us to speculate on the capabilities of any average Sunnydale citizen—who might be the next leader of a villainous trio, the next Dark Willow? Who, besides anyone?

[20] In any case, it seems in the final moments of "Seeing Red" (6.19) and in the following episodes that the supernatural is finally reasserting its primacy over the ordinary. "Scary/Veiny Willow" is very clearly not the Willow we knew. When Dawn accuses her of being "back on the magics," she corrects her, "No, Honey. I *am* the magics" ("Two to Go," 6.21). Jes Battis explains how "Willow's body, and Willow's magic, intersect upon a field of power that makes both subjects radically interchangeable ¼ Willow is thus no longer 'distinct' from her power ¼" (29). Certain critics may argue for the inconsistency of Willow's character in the final episodes, but her transformation is entirely consistent with the atmosphere of omnipresent magic Season Six has presented—an impossible to navigate universe of both euphoria and paranoia, where all are welcome, but none can escape, where the magical is the mundane, and the mundane is the magical, where Willow is the magics, and the magics is Willow.

[21] The establishment of such an ambiguous equilibrium needs further explanation. Willow represents, similarly though more emphatically than the Trio, the consequences of magic for the masses, and she also represents an articulation of the new postmodern space promised in the opening pages of this essay. The back-and-forth shifts "from the sublime to the ridiculous" (Pender 41), from the magical to the mundane, traced throughout early *Buffy* finally cease in Season Six, the last episodes of which urge another one-to-one correlation, this time between the still supernatural but widely accessible magic of the Buffyverse and the awesome yet equally accessible technological advances of postmodernity. Such technology can be easily accessed by many, navigated—not always successfully—by a trained few. The magical space that Dark Willow represents—that she has managed to tap into to the point where she embodies it—correlates further with the postmodern space Jameson describes as "the impossible totality of the contemporary world system ¼ that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions ¼" (*Postmodernism* 38). He suggests "the technology of contemporary society is ¼ mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp" (*Postmodernism* 37-8).

[22] Such an enormous, ungraspable network of power comes to be embodied in Willow; indeed, her power manifests itself via gestures that, while ultimately inscrutable, maintain a "dimly perceivable" familiarity, as parts of it are made visible on and through her body. Preparing herself to avenge Tara's death, Willow bursts into the magic shop where she literally soaks up the words and symbols of the darkest magic books she can find; they run over her skin like the text on a computer monitor ("Villains," 6.20). The message could not be clearer: Willow is hooked in. For past spells and rituals she often needed to speak complicated incantations, often in obscure languages, and the price of misspeaking meant any number of unpredictable effects. This is inconsistent with the way *Buffy* has often portrayed language; words alone have magical properties. But another, perhaps more precise way to see language in *Buffy* is as the key to the door behind which magic lies. Like the passwords Willow needed to find access to encrypted websites in early seasons, she uses particular sequences of words to access the magics. As Dark Willow, however, she no longer needs language, because she no longer needs access: She is the magics. [\[8\]](#) Thus in "Two To Go" (6.21), when she is fighting Buffy and attacking Jonathan and Andrew, and in the climactic scene in "Grave" (6.22) when Xander stands between her

and destruction of the world, Willow says nothing recognizable as either spell or incantation. She even mocks the use of language, as when she taunts Jonathan and Andrew—"You boys like magic, don't you?"—before contemptuously uttering the word "Abracadabra," at which lightning bolts shoot from her fingers ("Two to Go"). The word is in no way linked to the power. Rather, the power comes from somewhere else, somewhere only Willow can see while, for everyone else, her magic is utterly disorienting.

[23] It is due to this disorientation that Buffy herself cannot fight Willow. No match for the enormity of the magics, she can neither talk Willow out of her plan for vengeance nor beat her physically. Ruddell suggests that "Willow's fractured identity [here] also mirrors Buffy's fragile sovereignty" (5). It is indeed significant that Buffy is not present for the season finale's big fight, but ultimately this is the direction Season Six has been taking us all along—towards the understanding that there are things the Slayer cannot fight. They are too big.

[24] Hence the premiere of Season Seven, where the Big Bad is introduced as none other than Evil itself, the First Evil, a foe Buffy literally cannot touch, much less punch. [\[9\]](#) If Season Six succeeds in elevating the mundane to the level of the supernatural, leaving them in a state of indecipherable equilibrium, Season Seven seems to reverse this direction by introducing an almost mythic plotline—Buffy vs. Evil—thus elevating the supernatural back to its original hierarchical position. Such a reinstatement would be entirely disappointing, were it not possible to reinterpret the storyline more fittingly: mythic or not, the First Evil is another representative, like Dark Willow, of Jameson's unmappable postmodern hyperspace. It is in fact a better representative, for the First Evil symbolizes an even more enormous expanse of power, one that more perceptibly encompasses Buffy herself.

[25] As in the previous season, Seven emphasizes an atmosphere of mythic, magical possibilities. This is made most clear in the reintroduction of Sunnydale High School, rebuilt and reopened on the exact same spot as the old school. [\[10\]](#) Chaos reigns both at Sunnydale High and in Buffy's own home, steadily invaded by a growing number of potential Slayers. With increasing hesitancy and insecurity Buffy navigates these familiar but violated spaces—she never seems to sleep, she neglects Dawn, and she fails to learn even the first names of her new houseguests. In the early episode "Conversations with Dead People" (7.7), Buffy allows a psych student turned vampire to psychoanalyze her; this former classmate eventually articulates for Buffy that she has "a superiority complex, and you've got an inferiority complex about it."

[26] Buffy's aloneness is consistently underlined from this point on, and for the first time her leadership qualities are not just slightly but extremely unappealing. Helen Graham describes Buffy's rhetoric as "uncomfortably zealous," and she cites other critical articles which compare the Buffy of Season Seven to both a fascist and a pro-war US neo-conservative. [\[11\]](#) Ultimately Buffy's reckless leadership is judged so disagreeable that her friends, Watcher and gang of sheltered potentials decide she must be relieved of duty, and it is Dawn herself who orders Buffy to leave the house. [\[12\]](#) As much as Buffy reiterates that she is the leader, the Law, her confidence only serves to underline the fact that, in the inhospitable space that surrounds her, there is no guarantee of any fixed place, not for anyone—including the Slayer. Buffy is forced to face this in "Empty Places" (7.19), when Anya accuses her of thinking she is "better than us. But we don't know," Anya continues. "We don't know if you're actually better."

[27] Anya's speech introduces the uncomfortable proposition that Buffy is only "The One" by a lucky chance. As James South explains, Buffy's legacy is "not a necessary inheritance, but a chosen one. It didn't have to go the way it went. But then that also means we need not be bound by the way it went" (28). Buffy has been caught inside the

particular, limited story of the Slayer myth for all seven seasons; what she must now do is find her way outside of the story, even though the inside of it is all she has ever known, and to abandon it would mean abandoning her "fantasy of ultimate meaning" (South 27)—that she was chosen because she actually is better, superior. Giving up this fantasy means sure displacement and disorientation, which is exactly what Buffy encounters when she is exiled from her own home.

[28] Arguably displacement is what Buffy is really fighting in this season, the disorientation that occurs as a result of living in the thick of a threatening, occult world and being forced to abandon completely the comforting fantasy of a fixed identity outside of or in easily marked opposition to that world. Jameson discusses the effects of displacement brought on by the postmodern space, which he says

succeed[s] in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world $\frac{1}{4}$. This alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment $\frac{1}{4}$ can itself stand as the symbol $\frac{1}{4}$ of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds $\frac{1}{4}$ to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (*Postmodernism* 44)

[29] The First is the perfect representative of a decentered global communicational network: it can appear in numerous guises but essentially it is an invisible power that knows the characters' identities, knows their weaknesses and how to exploit them, can appear at any moment, tell lies, disorient, taunt, threaten, intimidate, etc. Elizabeth Rambo points out that

[w]hen various characters encounter the First Evil in various guises, they often ask something like, "did the First tell the truth?" $\frac{1}{4}$ and the answer often seems to be "Yes," at least in terms of immediate information. But careful analysis from a larger perspective reveals that usually the statements are only partially true, or that some vital information has been omitted. (28)

This ambiguity of the First is what makes it difficult to fight and impossible to fully perceive. But what makes the First a truly postmodern villain is that, even as Buffy grows more adept at recognizing its specific forms when they appear, she never sees its true face. In a dream in "Bring on the Night" (7.10), Joyce appears to remind Buffy that "evil is a part of us. All of us." Buffy can accept the truth of this or not—it doesn't solve the problem of the First's essential unrepresentability. Again it is helpful to link Buffy's incapacity with what Jameson says about the blindness associated with the historical situation of postmodernity. Jameson suggests that "[w]e do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace $\frac{1}{4}$ in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space $\frac{1}{4}$ of high modernism." We face, he says, "an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" (*Postmodernism* 38-9).

[30] Confronted with the idea of this imagined expanded body as a possible solution to the impossible disorientation of a threat like the First, it stops making sense to dwell on the Slayer's isolation. This is in fact the grave mistake made by the First on the penultimate night before the big fight—it emphasizes Buffy's loneliness: "There's that word again. What you are. How you'll die. Alone" ("Chosen," 7.22). Buffy's response is almost immediate, as it occurs to her that "we're gonna win," the operative word being "We." If one individual body is no match for this threat, then the body of the Slayer must be expanded, every potential in the world "activated," in the hope that this new, expanded body will be better equipped to, first, perceive the enormity of the First Evil and, next,

map its position apart from that Evil in a way that no single body ever could. What is abandoned here is the centered subject, the "monadic Ôpoint of view' ¼ to which we are necessarily, as biological subjects, restricted" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 53). Buffy's radical plan eliminates that restriction, makes the architecture of the First visible; it is only this visibility that allows she and the potentials to once again "grasp [their] positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by [their] spatial as well as ¼ social confusion" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 54).

[31] There are of course several problems with this radical plan, problems that are perhaps too easily disregarded in the face of such warm, American images as the young, fresh-faced girl in the batter's box, smirking at the pitcher from under her helmet. Several components of the plan are particularly troubling. Viewers have criticized the *deus ex machina* appearance of the scythe [\[13\]](#) and the amulet, both of which arrive suddenly, with little to no explanation. Spicer points out that Buffy's strategy, without these objects, probably would not have worked, and "Buffy herself acknowledges that it is Spike who has collapsed the Hellmouth" (10). Given the large number of Turok Han vampires beneath the seal, it is almost certain that Buffy and her gang of potentials, activated or not, would have lost the battle if Spike's amulet had not suddenly incinerated most of the enemy.

[32] Willow's role is also problematic. The potentials in Buffy's house may have a choice in whether or not Buffy's power becomes their power, but the others around the world are essentially given this power without deciding. Willow's spell, as she acknowledges in the episode's final moments, is world-changing, but more than this it is a total violation, denying agency to many if not most of its targets. Again Arwen Spicer articulates the problem:

The post-Season Six magic training that Giles helps to give Willow is principally oriented around working within the natural balance of the Earth. It defies credibility for these characters that neither of them raises any question about how losing the tremendous magic required to activate all the potentials might affect the balance of nature. (27)

[33] Spicer is right that Willow's anxiety over her own relationship to power is a constant theme of Season Seven. She understands its potential danger, yet she participates in the decision to transfer a similar responsibility to a vast number of unknown and unknowing girls. A similar responsibility but, it is important to point out, not an identical one. Critics like Spicer are right to ask, what gives Willow the right? But the finale itself supplies the answer: Willow the Wiccan had to be anxious about her power's relationship to the balance of nature; she learns in "Lessons" (7.1) that "it's all connected." Willow the goddess, however, more powerful than Buffy, the Shadow Men, and indeed any magical force in the entire occult world, is no longer connected. To access and manipulate the "essence" of the scythe, she must attain a kind of god-sight. Kennedy, in fact, calls her a goddess immediately following the success of the spell. She is too right, for Willow essentially does the impossible, seeing all of the potentials at once; it is she who is responsible for the expanded body that is Buffy's army, and it is only she who truly maps the extended space of *Buffy's* entire global system. As viewers we see only a handful of Willow's vision: the fresh-faced batter, the student leaning breathlessly against her locker, the abused daughter reaching up to check the latest blow. What Willow accomplishes is a feat no human being—and no super-human being, for that matter—could realize. Thus, as much as she is Willow here, at the same time she is not Willow anymore; she is "the Magics," white-haired this time, but ostensibly she is as she was at the end of Season Six—only more so. To take on an enemy like the First, Willow must be expelled from the ambiguous atmosphere of the Buffyverse; she exists in a realm apart, achieves the critical distance unavailable to anyone immersed in a postmodern space, restricted by

individual subjectivity. Willow succeeds in achieving a position external to the world that encompasses the slayers. From her unique position she perceives the fullness of the threat facing the potentials and judges their activation worth the risk. Her disconnection is what gives her the right.

[34] Critics cannot afford to stop, then, at the series finale's obvious emphasis on collective female empowerment, for that subversive message is only part of the story. Willow's new goddess position cannot be ignored, for it demonstrates the limit of *Buffy's* subversive potential. Buffy's plan becomes a prayer to a benevolent goddess, who answers her immediately, mainly because she's standing right there in the room, cracking jokes and wearing denim. So while collective power is something to celebrate—it has always been celebrated on the show—"Chosen" (7.22) suggests that power without critical distance will only get the Slayer so far; in order to take on an enemy as large as the world, Buffy needs a god on her side.

[35] She also needs luck, which she gets via the scythe and the amulet. Disconnected, as Willow is, from any kind of power Buffy has before encountered, these are the tools that ultimately save the world. And yet it is the army of slayers whom viewers are encouraged to see as playing the dominant part—naturally. What kind of utopian ending would "Chosen" (7.22) be if this were not the case? Helen Graham has articulated how successfully *Buffy* manages to present "what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized" (Dyer, qtd. in Graham 6). She emphasizes the importance of the "non-literalness" of certain components of *Buffy*, like fighting for example, which are "crucial in securing *Buffy* as *feeling like* an expression of general engagement with the world" (6). "Feminism in *Buffy* can be understood less as ideology and more as a *Ômood*," Graham explains. Women are not being sent a literal message, in other words, to sharpen sticks and attack men in graveyards. Rather, "the primary job of feminism-as-mood $\frac{1}{4}$ is to secure a generalizing impulse which enables Buffy's power to be a representational metaphor" (6). In "Chosen" we encounter the same non-literalness; there is no literal counterpart in the real world for the scythe, the amulet, or Willow's god-sight. They are made up; they provide "the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (Jameson, *Unconscious* 77). *Buffy* is subversive in that the desire for this resolution, the longing for the critical distance necessary to know and navigate the world, and to map one's place in it, is made so beautifully clear. *Buffy* is limited in that this resolution is finally effected through means that share no worldly counterpart. We have no answers, thanks to *Buffy*. Instead, we skip ahead to what it feel like if we did.

[36] "Chosen" (7.22), then, indeed asks that we stop to bask in the final images of collective female empowerment—but not for long. Not without examining what that power means in a world that, though certainly changed, is in many ways still the same huge, threatening, supernaturally charged world it has always been. Hardly the panacea to cure all of life's ills, power in *Buffy*, even before its everyday world and its occult world merged for good, has always been presented as problematic, both for those who have it and for those who are simply close to it. Buffy's powerfully radical plan in "Chosen" results in a temporary victory over an Evil that, in its attempt to annihilate the world, succeeds only in destroying Sunnydale. But as Giles is (too) quick to point out in the last scene, "There's another one [Hellmouth] in Cleveland." One message that has always been clear in *Buffy*, in the complex space it has consistently been interested in drawing, where tension between the supernatural and the natural continuously builds and wanes: there are always other fights, as many reasons to slay as there are reasons to live. For as long as she's been a Slayer, Buffy has understood the inevitability of threats, of fear, of fighting. She has felt the tension in her own body, and she has mistakenly assumed it is her own lonely burden to bear. Her half-smile at the end of "Chosen" appears not because this tension has disappeared in her, but because she knows that with the sharing of her power comes the

sharing of the same inevitable pressure. ^[14]"It is always different!" Buffy, preparing for another impossibly difficult battle, declares in "Selfless" (7.5). "It's always complicated. And at some point, someone has to draw the line, and that is always going to be me."

[37] You, Buffy, and everyone else.

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Notes

[1] Roz Kaveney articulates the problem with this strategy, explaining how the *Just Say No* policy Willow implements "is particularly spurious, since the show's internal logic always dictated that eventually she would return to sorcery when the story needed her to. Addiction would always have been referenced by Willow's abuse of power; that reference is weakened by tying it down" (35). No doubt Kaveney is correct: despite hearing the "magic is a drug" lesson loud and clear, viewers understand that it will be necessary for Willow to use magic again in a way that it would never be necessary for a drug addict to resume using.

[2] Probably the most frequently cited example comes from the Season Four episode "Superstar" (4.17): Xander, in an attempt to explain to Riley the deep level of concentration needed to cast spells successfully, offhandedly utters the Latin incantation, "Librum Incendere," at which the book he is holding bursts into flames. Giles tiredly requests that Xander not "speak Latin in front of the books."

[3] Consider "Fear, Itself" (4.4), in which fraternity brothers decorating their house for a Halloween party paint a random mystic rune on the floor, accidentally spill on it blood from a paper-cut, and thus summon a fear demon to wreak havoc at the event. This is immediately followed by "Beer Bad" (4.5), in which Buffy drinks magic beer and devolves into a curiously well-coifed cavewoman. Giles undergoes a similar transformation in "A New Man" (4.12) when his old friend/enemy Ethan Rayne drugs his drink, transforming Giles into a Fyarl demon. In "Something Blue" (4.9) Willow casts a spell to ease her depression over her break-up with Oz, and as a result Giles is blinded, Xander becomes a demon-magnet, and Buffy and Spike get engaged.

[4] We might wonder how many other nameless "kids" have cast Jonathan's elaborate spell, changing the world by changing their places in it, perhaps without ever attracting any notice by the Slayer. Earlier alternative reality episodes, in particular "The Wish" (3.9) and "Doppelgangland" (3.16), hint at Buffy's non-compulsory status when it comes to supernatural goings-on. As in "Superstar" (4.17), in both these episodes Buffy plays a subordinate role, as more attention is devoted to the vampire doubles of Xander and, in particular, Willow. Full discussion of these exceptional episodes is a topic for another paper; suffice it to say they demonstrate the instability of what characters in earlier seasons perceive as "normal" or "fixed." Even without Buffy's influence, alternative-reality-Willow has found her way in to the supernatural. The penultimate conversation between her and "normal" Willow in "Doppelgangland" (Vamp Willow pouts, "This world's no fun," to which our Willow replies, "You noticed that, too?") is worth dwelling on momentarily. Critics have pointed out the strangeness of Willow's reply—what support does she have for such a categorical judgment against her entire existence? Willow's later homosexuality as well as her slide into darkness ("That's me as a vampire? I'm so evil, and skanky ¼ and I think I'm kinda gay"), are not the only elements of her character foreshadowed in "Doppelgangland;" the episode also alludes to the god-sight I discuss later in this essay; Willow's encompassing judgment of the world augurs her eventual abstraction from it.

[5] His cavalier comment in "Checkpoint" (5.12) regarding the statue stolen from Burma that has the power to melt eyeballs—"In that case I severely underpriced it"—demonstrates his curious dispassion. In a separate episode Glory herself enters the shop to make a purchase, the result of which almost ends in Dawn's discovery.

[6] Granted, the gang are all too aware of the tendency for Magic Shop proprietors to be brutally killed. This objection is comically downplayed in "Real Me" (5.2), in which Giles, fresh from discovering the dead body of owner Mr. Bogarty, lists the various pros of the local "deathtrap"—high profit margins, low overhead, good location, etc. Giles even muses, "I bet the death rate keeps the rent down."

[7] Viewers first meet the Trio as the surprisingly unimpressive group behind the summoning of a pack of vicious, mercenary demons, hired to rob a bank; the Trio use the stolen money to build a collection of magical toys/weapons and to outfit their van with high-tech surveillance equipment, which they employ to both spy on Buffy and watch free-cable porn. With their bought and paid for power, the Trio plan their next scheme—a competition in which they score each other on how effectively each one of them can disrupt Buffy's routine ("Life Serial," 6.5)). Their villainy starts out as little more than a game. At the same time as they are supposedly testing and studying Buffy's reflexes, they are having heated arguments about who was a better James Bond and whether or not they should paint a giant Death Star on the side of their van.

[8] Caroline Ruddell explains in more detail in her article how "Willow has transcended the need to 'ritualize' her magic through lengthy citations ¼" (12).

[9] Evil is conveniently noncorporeal, appearing only in the guises of people who have already died, including Buffy herself, which naturally enhances her disorientation and social confusion.

[10] This gives the writers a chance to revisit some old plots. In "Storyteller" (7.16), for example, Buffy arrives at work early one morning only to encounter a series of supernatural occurrences—a shy student disappears from Buffy's sight, another rushes out of the bathroom in tears, claiming the mirror "said I was fat; it SAID it!", while another literally explodes from the pressure of his studies. While any one of these events would have been given its own episode in earlier seasons, here they are piled into a single scene.

[11] Her citations include Jonah Goldberg's "Buffy the U.N. Slayer," from *Townhall* 26 (2002); Neal King's "Brownskirts: Fascism, Christianity and the Eternal Demon" from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*, ed. James South, Open Court, 2003; and Jeffrey Pasley's "Old Familiar Vampires: the Politics of the Buffyverse" from the same collection.

[12] Arwen Spicer, in her article "It's Bloody Brilliant! The Undermining of Metanarrative Feminism in the Season Seven Arc Narrative of *Buffy*," convincingly argues for the lack of dialogic communication throughout Season Seven, pointing out Buffy's attempts to make all the decisions, the only effect being that she literally loses more ground.

[13] Buffy pulls this ancient yet inexplicably shiny weapon out of solid rock in "End of Days" (7.21). The amulet she takes from Angel, who is unable to tell her anything more than that it is meant to be worn by a champion and that it "has a purifying power ¼ or a cleansing power ¼ or possibly scrubbing bubbles" ("Chosen," 7.22).

[14] Helen Graham interprets the smile as "freedom." Buffy, she argues, "is freed of *having* to collectively engage ¼ she no longer has to answer ¼ questions" (11). Graham is right that Buffy's self-identification as an "individualized superhero" (11) shifts, but, as the Season Eight comic version of the series has already proven, Buffy's sense of self-responsibility hardly dissipates ("Everybody calls me 'Ma'am' these days," she says in the first issue, *The Long Way Home*), and the tension she experiences is not displaced—it rather expands. As always, Buffy must engage, she must answer questions, and, more importantly, all the young women who have just been given her power (the comic counts 1800 so far) will have to answer questions of their own. Rob Cover points out that along with the "ongoing serial themes" having to do with fighting demons, the characters in Buffy "are located in a seven-year arc figured through 'finding themselves,' their 'place' in contemporary society and 'dealing with' the strange, mystical, powers many of them encounter or possess" (8). It is a real struggle for most of them, most of the time—dealing with their power. Likewise it will be a struggle for all the newly

activated slayers. Jes Battis agrees that "the genealogy of [*Buffy's*] characters is the genealogy of the narrative itself" (40). Their rich histories, their many transformations, suggest "that it is not $\frac{1}{4}$ being 'finished' (6.3) that is most important, but rather the dark and seductive expanse of the story itself, with its critical gaps, eager to be reimagined" (40). "Chosen" continues *Buffy's* narrative genealogy (picked up properly, of course, by the current Dark Horse Comics series); the finale provides anything but closure. The only surety is that there will be more stories, more slayers and thus more conflicts, even potentially worse conflicts, and we have none other than our heroes, all of them complicit in a world-changing spell, to thank for that.