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The Bully Within and Without: Facing Intimidation in *Buffy*

“Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!” said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter. “You knew, didn’t you? I’m a part of you?”

William Golding – *Lord of the Flies*

Cordelia to Xander: It must be hard when all your friends have, like, superpowers. Slayers and werewolves and witches and vampires and you’re like this little nothing. From “The Zeppo” (3013)

Buffy reveals the horror of bullying and intimidation in many ways, exposing it through the tactics of gangs, high school kids, teachers, enemies, parents, lovers and friends. It explores the nature of cruelty, exposing its genesis, how and why it is executed, the devastating knock-on effect, and the struggle to overcome it.

Scenes of cruelty in *Buffy* often reveal a harsh reality, but many involve fantasy, which enhances the elements through metaphor. As Catherine Siemann writes in “Darkness Falls on the Endless Summer,” the psychology of the gothic is about “Taking the worst case scenario and using the supernatural to magnify it.” Ian Shuttleworth points out in “They always mistake me for the character I play,” that Xander’s possession by a hyena spirit in “The Pack” (1006) is a “hyper exaggeration of the dangers of peer pressure within a closed group.” *Buffy* likens Glory to Cordelia. As a goddess, Glory is the incarnation of bitchiness, materialism and self-obsession; she is an archetype that Cordelia resembles. However, Cordelia is human, therefore more complex and she carries the potential for positive growth and change. Unlike Cordelia, Glory is physically aggressive, as are the vampires and most of the demons in the series, for they highlight the impact of human cruelty.

The series explores various aspects of physical violence, which is the most obvious form of bullying. In relationships, it is revealed as an extension of psychological abuse. In “Beauty and the Beasts” (3004), Pete’s physical attacks on Debbie accompany the emotional blackmail he employs in his determination to force his will on her. In season four, Spike’s abuse of Harmony, where he takes his misery over losing Drusilla out on her, sometimes takes the form of physical attack, and as a soulless vampire he has no qualms about staking her. The vampires personify violence, but humans employ it, and can be in danger of incarnating the violent spirit. In “The Pack” the hyena-possessed bullies literally devour Principal Flutie. Like many victims of intimidation, he is a vulnerable person. As Giles explains of boys, and the zookeeper says of hyenas, “They prey on the weak.” Here an analogy is drawn between bullying and a predator’s desire to go for the kill. The bullies feed on fear, as a predator feeds on its prey. As Drusilla says in “Fool for Love” (5007) “I smell fear. It’s intoxicating!” A vampire is a predator in human form, and “The Pack” shows just how thin the line is between predator and man. The bullies are already close to crossing that line when they threaten to feed their victim Lance to the hyenas

before the spirit of a hyena affects them. In William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, boys marooned on an island away from moral restraints employ the same tactics they had used to hunt down a pig as, with a view to a kill, they hunt a boy. Likewise, the hyena-influenced bullies devour a pig before they go for Flutie.

All forms of bullying, whether physical or verbal, feed off the pain and fear of the victim. In his book *Dark Nature* Lyall Watson describes the pleasure that victimisation induces. He reports that one girl who ended up murdering a small child said that she "pinched and pricked babies for fun." The enjoyment of cruelty is exposed in *Buffy*. As Cordelia says after being spiteful to Xander in "The Zeppo," "There was no part of that that wasn't fun!" While invalidating, a person dismisses all feelings of conscience or empathy, and so feels a sense of power and allows the demonic spirit within free reign. As a soulless vampire Angelus thrives on inflicting torture. In "Lies My Parents Told Me" (7017) Spike's newly sired mother says, "I used to hate to be cruel in real life. Now I find it rather freeing!"

Loss of empathy can occur when people convince themselves that those outside the accepted norm are either inferior or a threat. J.P. Williams writes in "Choosing your own mother," that the mothers' persecution of their daughters in "Gingerbread" (3011) exaggerates "Joyce's inability to understand Buffy's double life and Sheila's neglect of Willow." In this demon-influenced mind frame, they are even prepared to burn their daughters at the stake. This reflects the atrocities committed by organisations like the Inquisition and the Nazis against millions of innocent people who did not fit a blueprint of apparent normality, and the way in which ordinary citizens can be influenced and brainwashed by such attitudes. In "My Emotions Give Me Power," E.R. Helford writes that the series defines Buffy and her pals as "outsiders." In season one, Cordelia and her friends label Buffy as "a freak" and Xander and Willow as "losers", thus treating them as outcasts. Cordelia may not be out to kill those she invalidates, but she has no empathy for them. She does not care what psychological damage she is causing, for her concern is to draw a clear line between herself and them. She sees them as inferior because they do not share her values and are not part of her elite circle, and they are a psychological threat to her because their unpopular status reflects her fears of loneliness and rejection. In "Out of Mind, Out of Sight" (1011) she admits that she can be surrounded by people, but still feel alone. Her fears are strong because she is essentially lonely. Due to her superficial values her friendships are fickle and conditional. She is therefore also subject to peer pressure. Rhonda Wilcox writes in "There will never be a very special Buffy" that Buffy's "loser" status is partly due to her "refusal to scorn" Willow and Xander. On discovering that Cordelia is dating Xander, her so-called friend Harmony jeers at her, saying, "A girl wants to look good for her geek!" Cordelia knows just how easily she could become the ostracised victim if she strays from the code that she and her circle live by.

Cordelia is a snobby rich girl, as opposed to Faith who is from a tough background of poverty and abuse. However, they both try to victimise Buffy, and they are both inwardly lonely due to their inability to form deep and lasting friendships or relationships. While Cordelia invalidates to ensure her superior position, Faith's cruelty lies in repressed guilt for killing a man, and also in her jealousy. As she says to Buffy in "Enemies" (3017) "You get the watcher, you get the mum, you get the little Scooby gang... What do I get? Jack Squat!" Faith's deprived and harsh past, the violence it unleashed in her and the murder she unwittingly committed have also given her low self-esteem. In "Who Are You?" (4016), she projects her self-hatred when she beats Buffy in her own body with the words, "You're nothing! A disgusting,

murderous bitch!” However, having come to terms with the gravity of her actions, it is through finding herself metaphorically in Buffy’s shoes once again, when the Scoobies and Potentials have looked to her for guidance in season seven that she finally connects with Buffy. She says, “My whole life I’ve been a loner. Look at you and everything you have... I don’t know – jealous. Then there I am... Everybody’s looking to me, trusting me to lead them, and I’ve never felt so lonely in my entire life. And that’s you, every day, isn’t it?” The personal experience of Buffy’s situation enables Faith to empathise with her, so the final remnants of the desire to invalidate Buffy disappear. Likewise, although Cordelia has already shown signs of change during her brief relationship with Xander, it is only when she loses her financial security and so finds herself in the shoes of the have-nots she despises that she is ready to begin the positive transition she goes through in *Angel*.

Cordelia and Faith eventually embark on the hard road of change, but other invalidators do not. In season three Principal Snyder is so concerned with his position of importance that he falls in with the evil Mayor. In season six, Warren becomes so desperate to achieve control and power that he loses all sense of morality and empathy, resorting to shooting at Buffy and accidentally killing Tara, through shooting indiscriminately. Psychological studies of boys who have killed with guns, such as the tragic incident at Columbine High School, have suggested that they had been bullied. The experience of that had nurtured their aggression. Both Warren and Snyder were once victims of invalidation. As Warren says to a young man in “Seeing Red” (6019), “You and your jock buddies used to give me such a hard time... You remember that thing with the underwear?” In “Becoming Part Two” (2022) Buffy says to Snyder, “You never had a single date in High School, did you?” She senses that Snyder’s problem derives from feelings of rejection.

The series reveals that one of the hardest forms of invalidation to deal with and overcome is that of being rejected or ignored. In “Fool for Love” Spike asks Buffy to hit him when she repels his attempt to kiss her. That could be construed as a vampire’s love of violence, but in “Into the Woods” (5010) Riley asks the same thing of her. Even the pain of violence is sometimes sought rather than the coldness of rejection or neglect. Candice Havens writes in her book on Joss Whedon that at high school he experienced feeling “invisible, unimportant and unappreciated.” The horror of that inspired his idea for Marcia’s predicament in “Out of Mind, Out of Sight.” To be ignored can feel like a negation of one’s existence. As Marcia says, “They take your life and they suck it out of you!” She becomes invisible because everyone ignores her. As with Marcia, Jonathan is even invalidated in this way by people who are not bullies. In “Earshot” (3018) Buffy says to Jonathan, “I don’t think about you much at all. Nobody here really does. Bugs you, doesn’t it?” Marcia and Jonathan are targeted the most, but both Xander and Willow also have to deal with a sense of rejection and dismissal, as well as verbal invalidation. Cordelia’s reference to Xander as “this little nothing” in “The Zeppo” echoes her words to Willow, “Who gave you permission to exist?” in “The Harvest” (1002).

Invalidation damages the victims’ self-esteem and destabilises them. Like Warren, Marcia turns to vengeance and so she in her turn becomes an invalidator. Jonathan swings from a plan to commit suicide in “Earshot,” to his deal with a demon to be noticed in “Superstar” (4017) and later on to a plan to be a super-villain as part of the Trio in season six. As Justine Larbalestier writes in “*Buffy’s* Mary Sue is Jonathan,” at the end of “Superstar” Jonathan “must return to being uncool and must endure the pain of his grandiose desires becoming public knowledge.” With the additional problem of incessant intimidation, Jonathan suffers more humiliation than

he can deal with. He does not muster the strength to follow Buffy's advice at the end of "Superstar" when she says, "You can't keep trying to make everything work out with some big gesture all at once. Things are complicated. They take time and work."

Xander is tempted by the easy solutions, creating the persona of "Night Hawk" in "Anne" (3001), and trying to look cool as the man with a car in "The Zeppo." He even comments on Jonathan's moment of being a super-hero, saying, "I'll always remember the way he made me feel about me... Respected, sort of tingly. Now I'm just empty." However, to combat the low self-esteem he suffers from years of invalidation, Xander gradually learns to tap into his strengths. Initially, he mainly defends himself with jokes, which echo Buffy's quips when she fights vampires. K.E. Overbey and L. Preston-Matto point out in "Staking in Tongues" that, as Freud argued, an enemy ridiculed is made "small, inferior, despicable or comic." In "The Zeppo" Xander learns a more powerful method of defence. Although the bully Jack threatens him, boasting that his own lack of fear gives him the edge, Xander turns the situation around when he realises Jack's fear of being destroyed. Xander now finds the courage to challenge Jack from a position of strength, and having drawn on his own power, he is also able to deal with Cordelia's invalidation with a silent response that confuses and disturbs her. He draws on the bullies' tactics as well as on his own strength to beat them at their game.

The phenomenon of beating the enemy through absorbing some of that dark energy is reflected metaphorically in "Buffy v. Dracula" (5001) when Buffy needs a taste of Dracula's blood to connect with enough of her inner power to defeat him. Indeed, Buffy is already linked to the demons she fights because her power lies partly in darkness. In "Vampires and School Girls" G. Wisker refers to the vampire as "a boundary breaker." On becoming the Slayer, the essence of which was originally from a demon, Buffy rejected the conventionality of the popular crowd, and from that moment she has also been a boundary breaker. She uses that anarchic streak to stand up against the invalidation of authority figures. In "Becoming Part 2" she defies Principal Snyder when he says that if there's trouble then she's behind it, and tells him that he is a "stupid little troll!" She takes the power out of the Watchers' Council's hands in "Checkpoint" (5012), and defies the original Watchers' creation of one Slayer at a time when she asks Willow to empower all Potentials in "Chosen."

Buffy can be hurt by invalidation, for instance when she is in love, for as Rhonda Wilcox writes in "Who Died and Made Her the Boss?" "The series clearly displays her vulnerability." However, Buffy lives her life in the face of death and displays extraordinary bravery. Her strength of character pulls her through, even when she is emotionally devastated by Angel's cruel rejection of her when he loses his soul. Although she is finally prepared to kill him, her motive is to protect her friends and the community. When she decides to send him to hell in "Becoming Part 2" in order to save the world, she goes through with it, even though his soul is restored at the last moment and the pain of her sadness is acute. Despite his cruelty, she still loves him. The Guide in "Intervention" (5018) says to Buffy, "Love is pain, and the Slayer forges strength from pain." Dave Pelzer, who was one of the most abused children in California, recently said to a UK newspaper, "Sometimes it takes a terrible tragedy for us to remember our freedoms." The paper states that he uses his experiences as a child to help overcome other obstacles in his life, and that even though his mother tortured and nearly killed him, "he sees her as an abused woman herself and the prisoner of her own past." Buffy follows a similar pattern of sufferance, love, forgiveness, strength and growth. She does not lose herself to the desire for vengeance.

Once Warren has killed Tara and has attempted to kill Buffy in season six, Buffy tries to pull Willow back from exacting her revenge. Due to a lack of self-confidence, Willow finds it difficult to deal with invalidation. Throughout her school days, classmates like Cordelia and Harmony pick on her, telling her she is boring and jibing at the clothes she wears. In her dream in “Restless” (4022) the more confident image she has developed is stripped away as a mere costume and her friends make fun of her. Increasingly reliant on her magic powers, in “Wrecked” (6010) Willow says to Buffy, “If you could be plain old Willow or super Willow, who would you be?” She has been invalidated so much in the past that she has internalised it as a self-deriding bully within. When she loses herself to the dark magic after Tara’s death during the last three episodes of season six, she gives voice to the self-hatred that it has engendered. She describes herself as a loser, and says, “People picked on Willow in junior high school... up until college, with her stupid, mousy ways, and now Willow is a junkie!” Her pain and fury at the murder of the one person she considers has given her some sense of self-worth unleashes the bully within, as she takes her hunger for vengeance out on everyone around her. Helped by Giles’ positive magic from the English coven, her realisation of Xander’s unconditional love for her brings her back to herself. Here Xander displays not only the extent of his bravery, but also the healing power of his heart when he puts his life on the line to stop Willow’s destructive rage and to reconnect her to herself.

In *Buffy* validation repeatedly counteracts invalidation. In season seven, the validation of Giles’ belief in Willow, followed by Kennedy and Buffy’s encouragement, eventually enables her to muster enough confidence to release the power of her positive potential through the true magic that lies beyond the dark arts. Even Buffy needs to feel supported in some way. When the Scoobies and Potentials lose their faith in her and temporarily reject her leadership in season seven, she becomes dejected. However, when ensouled Spike reveals his enduring belief in her and says, “You’re a hell of a woman. You’re the one, Buffy,” he gives her back the confidence to follow her calling and reclaim her position. Buffy’s validation of Willow and Xander is significant. Not only does she defy Cordelia’s popular set by choosing to be friends with Willow and Xander, but she also gives them both a sense of purpose and belonging, and in “Checkpoint” she tells the Watchers’ Council how valuable they are to her. She thus helps them to move towards realising their potential.

When bullies support each other, a formidable force is formed. In “The Pack” the bullies join together to intimidate, and once infected by the hyena spirit, the group is strong enough to kill any individual person. Even Buffy realises that she would run into problems if she tried to fight them. However, the series shows how individuals in a group with negative intent possess little compassion, so they do not share the bond of friendship that Buffy and her friends have. Not only do Cordelia’s friends reject her when she strays from the agreed path of conduct in season two, but in season six Warren and Andrew plot to oust Jonathan from the trio because they only want him until he is no longer of use to them. Even when Willow has killed Warren, thus breaking the Scoobies’ code of human conduct, Buffy, Giles and Xander work on saving her. The Scoobies occasionally fall out with each other, but only temporarily. Each of them brings out the most positive potential in the others, and therefore as a group they are powerful adversaries for anyone who tries to bring them down. This is highlighted through metaphor when Buffy, Willow, Xander and Giles form the group being in “Primeval” (4021) to defeat Adam. Here their friendship has conquered Spike’s attempts to play on their differences. Their mutual support repeatedly helps each one of them overcome the damaging effect of invalidation.

The series reveals that although there are bullies and victims, to quote a phrase periodically used on *Buffy*, “it’s not that simple,” for victims can become invalidators and visa-versa. Some suffer a tragic decline, either crushed by a sense of defeat or consumed by a desire for vengeance. However, others grow stronger through harnessing their own strength and dark aspect in order to face the bullies and to go through their pain. Above all, the power of compassion is emphasised as the validation that even Buffy needs to defeat cruelty and to fulfil her potential.

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