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“Size Doesn’t Matter?”: The Disembodied Miniature in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Buffy Summers, the title character in Joss Whedon’s influential television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, offers a dichotomy of size and expectation: she appears to be the typical California girl—blonde, petite, thin—but is really this generation’s inheritor of a sacred birthright to rid the world of vampires and demons. This birthright grants Buffy extraordinary strength, agility, rapid healing, and a preternatural awareness of evil that belies the small frame gifted to her by genetics. In the show’s pilot episode, “Welcome to the Hellmouth,” Angel meets the Slayer seemingly for the first time and comments, “Truth is, I thought you’d be taller, or bigger muscles and all that.” The truth of the Slayer—a teenaged girl fighting against a world of evil—does not rely on the appearance of strength but rather what is unseen. When Angel suggests that Buffy’s height and muscle definition are at odds with her ability, he acknowledges the need for a visual correlation, an opponent’s desire to “size up” the other fighter and measure the chance of success.

The series begins with a dichotomy of size and ability that continues throughout its run; while many suggest that Buffy is “just a girl,” they base these assumptions on her outward appearance. The Slayer is often underestimated by the demons and vampires that populate the Hellmouth of Sunnydale, California, and her diminutive size suggests a David fighting against a variety of evil Goliaths: Buffy as the miniature fighter against the giant forces of evil. But discussion of the miniature and the gigantic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is not limited to The Slayer’s size. The recurring theme of *humans* fighting against the horrors of demons, vampires, and, indeed, the Hellmouth itself, gives apt justification to the image of David fighting Goliath.

Buffy and the Scooby Gang constantly war against enemies larger than life and expectation. In the external manifested threats, whether from the Big Bads or episodic “creatures of the week,” the enemies are human-sized—or very near so—or gigantic in comparison to the petite heroine.

*Some possible exceptions are the Anointed One from seasons one and two, Hansel and Gretel from season three’s “Gingerbread,” and the disembodied First Evil from season seven.*

*However, The Anointed One, a child chosen to be the vampiric messiah, never acts in any violent activity and is killed by Spike, who exposes him to sunlight. Hansel and Gretel, while manifested as children in Sunnydale and throughout folklore, are in fact two parts of one very large demon. And, of course, the First Evil must manifest itself in a human vessel in order to do any real damage.*

But in season four’s episode “Fear, Itself,” the episodic demon is presented as both disembodied and embodied. When Gachnar is disembodied or incorporeal, he is an unseen threat that occupies a fraternity house and distorts reality, playing and feeding on very real human fears. When he is accidentally called forth into embodiment, his form is miniscule, a miniature representation of demonic activity that no longer threatens the Slayer because of his “actual size.” As a disembodied threat, Gachnar is the gigantic, a folkloric giant brought to life and able to occupy space previously unavailable to him in his physical form. His lack of physicality allows him to swell and encompass all space within the house, to both overwhelm and to gobble up the landscape. In short, a disembodied threat is a threat to the “normal” world. When the miniature demon is embodied and manifests himself in a physical form, however, the normal world is a threat to him; once the disembodied miniature is tangible, he can be domesticated, coddled, and therefore defeated.

Because the disembodied is the unknown, its very nature is uncontainable and limitless; having no boundaries, the disembodied miniature is able to inhabit as much of the landscape as it chooses to. In this sense, the disembodied, regardless of its corporeal size, is always the gigantic because it has attributes associated with the folkloric giant: limitless reach, lack of containment, consumption, and incitement of panic. Once the Halloween haunted house is truly haunted, the unknown threat occupies and manipulates the landscape. Stairs and closets disappear, and windows and doors are swallowed by the house itself. Because the demon Gachnar has no corporeal form, he does not take up space the way that physicality demands. Instead, he expands and contracts to occupy the amount of space he desires. In this sense, the fraternity house Gachnar inhabits becomes not only a physical form of his disembodied self, but it also becomes his dollhouse. Gachnar is able to manipulate the house and those in it at will; he can seal off the house, bring death or life to its inhabitants, and move rooms and objects as he wishes. The distortion of size becomes apparent as Gachnar completely fills the landscape of the fraternity house; this occupation forces the house, and the college students inside, to become miniatures themselves, dolls inside a dollhouse manipulated by the gigantic. Unlike other miniature tales in which the normal world manipulates the dollhouse to do its will, "Fear, Itself" explodes the nostalgia of the dollhouse to turn it into something horrifying and grotesque.

As Gachnar distorts space, reality, and time and becomes the gigantic, he inhabits an enclosed space in which to manipulate and create what Stewart calls "a tension or dialectic between inside and outside, between private and public property, between the space of the subject and the space of the social" (68). Gachnar is not just a giant, but fear, itself: an intangible concept that becomes tangible because he breaks the tension between inside and outside, between private and public, when he exposes and exploits the Scooby Gang's worst fears.

Buffy, currently dealing with yet another male abandonment in her life (her father, Angel, and now Parker) is alone in the house and taunted with her fears. Xander, worried over his college friends forgetting their “townie” buddy, is truly invisible to his friends. Willow, whose magic is at best “fifty-fifty,” as Buffy reminds her, cannot control her latest spell. And Oz, forever concerned about hurting Willow when he is in wolf form, begins his transformation without benefit of a full moon. What would normally be ordinary, everyday fears are instead swelled out of proportion and manifested into reality. The giant or the gigantic, so often associated with the fair or the carnivalesque, is in this episode literally “gobbling up” the everyday world. Gachnar not only eats the house, itself, but is also feeding on fear. But when Buffy says, “Our fears are manifesting it. We’re feeding it. We need to stop,” Xander recognizes that the giant cannot be contained by limiting its appetite or objects of consumption or by ignoring the elephant in the room. He says, “If we’re close our eyes and say it’s a dream it’ll stab us to death! These things are real.”

What remains important about Xander’s and Buffy’s observations is that they recognize the need for corporeality, the “realness” Xander observes. Like Stewart suggests of the gigantic, Gachnar affects and controls the body (87-88). All that happens to the Scooby Gang is rooted in the body: Buffy is physically alone, Xander becomes undetectable by sight, sound, or touch, Oz changes into his werewolf form, and Willow is bodily attacked by the product of her magic. When Buffy enters the basement, she hears a disembodied voice saying “All alone” before a dead fraternity member manifests himself and says, “They all ran away from you. They always will. Open your heart to someone and—But don’t fret, little girl, you’re not alone anymore.” His use of the words “little girl” not only comment on her stature and Little Red Riding Hood costume—itsself a symbol of purity and the savior of grandmothers from gobbling wolves—it

makes a comparison between the largeness of the house and the smallness of Buffy's body and calls forth the reminder that while she is The Slayer, she still is "just a girl," and a short, diminutive one at that. His statement also breaks down the barrier between play-acting and reality. Early in the episode, Buffy expresses her desire for escapism from her situation with Parker—she tells Willow "I just don't want to deal with this right now. I'm taking a holiday from dealing, happily vacationing in the land of not coping." And the series often reiterates Buffy's wish that she were, at times, "just a girl." While Halloween is a time of little demonic activity in the Buffiverse, because as Giles notes, "Creatures of the night shy away from Halloween. They find it all much too crass," the scary house, the costumes, the consumption of candy, liquor, and sexual promiscuity are all tropes found in the carnival or fair, the true celebration of the flesh. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note that "Carnival was the repeated, periodic celebration of the grotesque body—fattening food, intoxicating drink, sexual promiscuity, altered ego-identity, the inverse, and the heteroglot" (189), all celebrations called forth on Halloween and, particularly, in the Alpha Delta's scary house itself.

But despite the fact that Gachnar distorts reality, and throughout most of the episode is a disembodied threat, his manifestations of fear are very real, as is his attempt *at* manifestation. Gachnar continuously demands "Release me!" so he can come into being, and when Giles shows Buffy a portrait of Gachnar's embodied self, The Slayer stresses, "I *don't* want to fight that." In his article "The Miniature as Reduction and Talisman in Fielding's *Amelia*," Steven J. Gores discusses the power held within the "representational quality of the miniature" (574-5) and how the miniature "fosters an artificial sense of security" (575). Gachnar, represented on paper, is still a disembodied threat, something Buffy does not want to fight, and doesn't have to, as long

as he remains disembodied. She feels secure in knowing that the actual representation of the demon is locked in a book and in his symbol. Only when Gachnar is released—when Buffy unwittingly destroys his symbol and calls him forth in the flesh—does The Slayer have to face the demon’s physical presence. The irony of the episode lies in this moment: Buffy, in a declaration of headstrong superiority, destroys the Mark of Gachnar before her Watcher can finish reading the inscription that clearly states that the destruction of the mark only succeeds in calling the demon forth. As the house begins to rumble and light shines from the broken mark, Buffy pouts, looking as petulant and sullen as a child who has disappointed her father. The miniaturization of Buffy, the panning away of the camera and her childish pout, prelude what Xander claims is a “big overture.” Unfortunately for Gachnar, it is a “little show.”

This petulance marks Buffy’s attitude towards Gachnar when his corporeal self is released; once The Slayer realizes Gachnar’s true size, her attitude changes from one of fear to one of condemnation and coddling. Gachnar, once physically embodied, is only a few inches tall. The Scooby Gang stares down at him from immeasurable height as the tiny fear demon looks up at them. Even his voice changes: once booming and deep, his voice is now squeaky. The Scooby Gang can barely hold back their laughter. After Gachnar says, “I am the dark lord of nightmares! The bringer of terror! Tremble before me! Fear me!” Willow states, “He’s so cute!” and Xander taunts, “Who’s a little fear demon?” Once Gachnar is manifested, the Scooby gang can no longer take him seriously, despite their very real fears the demon managed to manifest. Stewart reminds us that “scale is established by means of a set of correspondences to the familiar” (46). When Gachnar occupies the house, his gigantic self is uncontainable. When he is completely manifested, he is considerably smaller; his size, when compared to the familiar—the “normal” size of the Scooby Gang—is defeatable and, indeed, laughable. The demon attempts to torment

Buffy, saying “they’re all going to abandon you, you know” to which Buffy responds, “yeah, yeah” before she smashes her foot down on the demon. Because Gachnar is now the miniature, he no longer poses a threat, both physically and mentally. In this moment, the show asserts that his small size negates any previous threat established.

The disembodied nature of the demon convinces Buffy that her fears of abandonment are justified; the manifested demon is a laughable subject. Buffy does not even acknowledge that his assertions are a real part of her fear. In her article “Dwarf, Small World, Shrinking Child: Three Versions of the Miniature,” Caroline C. Hunt asserts that “to be a dwarf is to differ from the norm. The metaphor allows an author to suggest something abnormal, perhaps pitiable, about the small protagonist. The small size of the body presents a tangible symbol for a small degree of importance or status” (116). Because Gachnar is now small, he has small importance; all of his former threats are negated in the moment he becomes embodied as the miniature. When Giles cautions Buffy about her slayer duties, she responds, “Size doesn’t matter?” In this intersection lies the crux of the argument: the miniature can be a threat when unknown as the miniature. As a disembodied being, it can occupy as little or as much space as it desires. But once the being is embodied, it is *containable* and *controllable*. More importantly, the miniature is easily manipulated. Like many texts that domesticate the giant by harnessing its power and controlling it, this episode of Buffy does the same; by making the giant domestic, these texts make the gigantic miniature. “Fear, Itself,” despite initial worries over Buffy’s apprehension at killing something so small, reiterates a theme prevalent in discussions of the miniature and gigantic. Size *does* matter. The fear demon’s actual size negates all of its previous threats and allows for its destruction. Only a small size, a manifested embodied demon, can be defeated. But the dichotomy of pairing the miniature and gigantic together in one being creates the humor evident

in this episode. In her article, "The Odd Couple: Gargantua and Tom Thumb," Anne Lake Prescott argues that "if setting the gigantic against the miniscule encourages thoughts about perspective and outlook, rhetorically coupling a giant and a pygmy can create a monster even more apt to amuse, horrify, and instruct" (75). Gachnar accomplishes all three of these actions: his physical size amuses, his unmanifested spirit horrifies, and his destruction instructs The Slayer. Buffy triumphs over her despondence regarding the Parker affair and concludes the episode by stating, "There is no problem that cannot be solved with chocolate." By defeating the fear demon and experiencing the humor evident in his actual size, Buffy is able to defeat her own fears of male abandonment. Although she herself felt miniaturized by her one-night stand, she emerges triumphant at the end of the episode. The Slayer, despite her petite frame, is a gigantic heroine, able to defeat any demon with whom she comes in contact, big or small.



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