

**“Not so much connected:” Reconciliation and Community
in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

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[1] Buffy’s role as the Slayer entangles her very being with the death of the material body. In Buffy’s own words: “Death is what a Slayer breathes...Death is what a Slayer lives” (“Potential” B7012). As David Lavery has established, the organisational form of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* boasts a continuous “narrative eschatology” ranging from the typical destruction of the monster-of-the-week to the grand apocalyptic ending of each season (par. 3). Structurally, therefore, Buffy is always hurtling towards new violent terminations and so is unceasingly required to attain ever-higher levels of strength and skill. In her essay “A Slayer’s Death Denial,” Melissa Mahoney suggests that while this pattern ensures that Buffy becomes increasingly adept at her job, each season finale’s unprecedented apocalypse is introduced in order to halt the burgeoning notion of immortality garnered throughout a season of successful slaying (par. 11). Buffy’s resurrections in Seasons One and Six, and even her non-fatal trials, certainly catalyse existential re-examination and can even provoke a depressive disinterest in human life altogether. It is not simply her own mortality, however, that is complicated for Buffy. It is also the understanding of her relation to humanity. It is made clear throughout the series that Buffy finds difficulty in fully connecting with the non-super people in her life, Riley being a helpful example, and grapples with a superiority complex summarised in the episode “Conversations with Dead People” (B7007). A deep-seated uneasiness with her own status as a human being at times leads Buffy to search for solace through focusing heavily on the supernatural side of herself, often to the detriment of her human relationships.

[2] Buffy, as Rhonda Wilcox has explored, is “a liminal character, on the edge between light and dark”, and has to continuously balance the human and supernatural sides of herself (83). This inherent duality of person affords Buffy the opportunity to align herself with either the mortal or the supernatural world. This is an interesting light in which to view the relationships Buffy pursues with Angel and Spike who, as vampires, are exempt from the ordinary machinations of human life. Especially in the case of Angel, Buffy’s envy at his exemption from mortal existence is profoundly evident in her anguish at her own pre-destined death in “Prophecy Girl:” “What do you know about this? You’re never gonna die” (B1012). Here, Buffy reveals a degree of jealousy and even attraction predicated upon Angel’s fundamental detachment from the transient nature of the human world. Buffy was indeed attracted to Angel before she was aware he was a vampire, however, the fact that Buffy admits to falling in *love* with Angel pretty much immediately after this discovery suggests that this revelation only intensified her feelings for him. Buffy tries to pursue a relationship

with the purely human Riley, but this relationship eventually crumbles under Buffy's reluctance to share the burden of being the Slayer with him. As she cannot help but see it, they operate in different worlds and this relationship is tellingly book-ended by relationships with vampires who possess their own supernatural abilities. As Spike tells Riley, Buffy needs some "monster in her man" ("Into the Woods" B5010).

[3] But a Slayer who has difficulty in acknowledging her own humanity is in a precarious position. A sense of infallibility fuelled by both evolving skill and a disregard for her own material life has been read as a detrimental outlook by numerous critics including Stevenson, Jarvis, and Mahoney who argue that such a lack of personal insight precludes the possibility for "authentic decision-making" (Mahoney, par. 3). Stevenson writes that "living eschatologically means letting the prospect of death enrich life," and that life becomes more precious when we recognise its limited duration (par. 12). It is in this respect that the role of apocalypse in *Buffy* is pivotal as the gravity of the situation demands that Buffy reach out and connect to her friends for support as opposed to solely relying on herself. As Buffy progresses through each season towards an unusually heightened threat she also progresses towards the overdue recognition of both her own mortality and humanity. Thus, each season's apocalyptic conclusion is never truly carried to finality because it is a structurally necessary event that facilitates the recalibration of Buffy's whole approach to life. Even though Buffy may deal with a loss of faith in the human world or contend with a total lack of drive - "So, Dawn's in trouble. Must be Tuesday." ("Once More With Feeling" B6007) - she *always* rallies, and in this light, each triumph over a "Big Bad" is indicative of Buffy's newly realised and powerful attachment to the human world. Ultimately, *Buffy* presents the same message time and time again: it is through connecting with others, sharing her power and embracing her own humanity that Buffy is able to access greater power than any Slayer before her.

[4] If we agree with Wilcox's argument that Buffy is drawn to relationships with vampires because of their shared sense of liminality, it follows that Buffy's relationship with Angel depicts a desire to occupy two disparate worlds rather than commit to one or reconcile the two. But despite this, from the first season Buffy is seen as a revolutionary Slayer due to the strong bonds she forges with her community of friends. Although upon hearing of her prophesised death in "Prophecy Girl" Buffy declares that she refuses to act as Slayer any longer, her conversation with Willow, in which Willow expresses her fear that the forces of darkness invading Sunnydale had made the human realm "theirs. And they had fun" (B1012), the personal distress Buffy feels at the prospect of humanity's displacement in the world makes plain her inescapable connection to mankind. This empathy ultimately leads her to face the Master, regardless of the threat to her own life. Buffy may have a fear of death, but in the single-mindedness she demonstrates on her final journey to meet the Master we detect an unshakeable need to protect the mortal world at all costs. This atmosphere is deliberately emphasised by the ostentatious overlay of the *Buffy* theme as she marches towards the Master, conveying her supreme confidence in the importance of her role

as Slayer. Here, it is explicitly the threat to the Scooby community that makes Buffy feel her own connection to humanity deeply and her ensuing actions demonstrate how pivotal her friends are in rooting her in the mortal world. This acknowledgment makes Buffy deadlier than ever; she has never had so much to fight for.

[5] Yet Buffy often finds difficulty in connecting to her human counterparts when this requires scrutiny of how unique her own place in the mortal world really is. At the end of “Innocence” (B2014), although Buffy is aware that Angel has lost his soul and reverted to Angelus, she is unable to muster the strength of will to face the finality of staking him. There are multiple factors compounding Buffy’s unwillingness to stake Angelus, the primary reason surely being the emotional devastation this would wreak within her, but perhaps another is the reluctance to sacrifice a figure who occupies a place in the world so similar to her own - ensouled and outwardly human but in possession of a supernatural strength that sets him apart from the rest of society. Perhaps his existence is proof to Buffy that she is not alone. In reality though, Buffy’s exceptional status among Slayers, specifically the supportive presence of surrounding friends and family, enables her empathetic community to extend far beyond Angel. Buffy eventually comes to acknowledge this attribute but it unfortunately takes further suffering, and especially the death of Miss Calendar, for this reality to really hit home. At the end of “Passion” this turning point is made clear as Buffy tells Giles:

I’m sorry I couldn’t kill him for you, for her, when I had the chance. I wasn’t ready, but, I think I finally am. I can’t hold on to the past anymore. (B2017)

Miss Calendar’s murder at the hands of a supernatural being pushes Buffy to re-evaluate her own place within her immediate community and to realise that her own life is so closely entwined with the Scoobies that the possibility of her own death, or even the prospect of losing someone who inhabits the same liminal space of supernatural humanity, is not enough to neglect the human world over. Ultimately, Buffy feels her ties to humanity too deeply to ignore and with these words she actively relinquishes her attraction to a hypothetical liminal future with Angel.

[6] Miss Calendar’s death is framed in a deliberately sexist manner in which her agency is stripped away by two men in her final moment. Angelus forcibly takes her life and then the tragedy of her death is conveyed through her presence as Giles’s romantic interest. On a structural level, the fact that this event pushes Buffy closer to the Scoobies is significant in that it leads to the formation of a more equalised support system in favour of the traditional hierarchy of command upheld by the Watchers’ Council. At the close of this season, when Willow casts the spell to re-ensoul Angelus, Giles refuses to give Angelus pivotal information, even under torture, and Xander helps rescue Giles in the final fight, Buffy demonstrates the superior strength accessible through her friends when they combine their strengths and create a bridge between the natural and supernatural world.

[7] When we reach the conclusion of Season Three, Buffy is largely content in her relationships with her friends and mother but Angel is again a big part of her life and lingers as a reminder of her rare liminal status. First the Mayor, then Joyce, and eventually Angel himself, all end up pushing Buffy to recognise that with Angel around she has no future as a normal girl, both in terms of a sexual relationship and in commonplace participation in the mortal world. As Angel admits, “You should be with someone who can take you into the light” (“The Prom” B3020). Although in the heat of the moment Buffy declares that “I don’t care about that” and “I’ll never have a normal life” in an effort to cling to her isolated position in the supernatural world, she ultimately cannot deny how desolate a life that would be (B3020). In the very same episode, “The Prom,” Buffy admits to Willow that she understands ‘maybe, in the long run, that he’s right.’ (B3020)

[8]At the other end of the spectrum we are presented with Faith who demonstrates the path of a Slayer who, after several failed connections with humans - Gwendolyn Post being a prime example - chooses to distance herself from her mortal bonds and place greater emphasis on her role as Slayer through her relationship with the Mayor. This relationship is paternal, yes, but it is also deeply dependent upon Faith’s function as a Slayer and in this sense also patriarchal; it is often characterised by Faith carrying out the Mayor’s orders in return for material rewards and fatherly praise. It is a social paradigm that interweaves rank with affection and the degree to which Faith seeks validation through her supernatural Slayer abilities is disquieting; it appears as another means of isolating herself from her non-super human peers. The Mayor tells Faith, “A dog’s friendship is stronger than reason, stronger than its own sense of self-preservation. Buffy’s like a dog,” (“Choices” B3019) and so reinforces the thinking that peer relationships are dangerous and should be avoided. Buffy’s attempted murder of Faith can then arguably be seen as the endpoint of a Slayer who has totally rejected the possibility of finding any strength in sharing power. Moreover, when Buffy stabs Faith she is provided with a taste of the disregard for human life in which Faith has chosen to locate her strength. The jolt of fear that Buffy receives in this act is then twofold; through the death of a Slayer she is shown her own mortality and also catches a glimpse of her plausible future if she chooses to cut herself off from her community. In her decision to include the entire senior class in the final assault on the Mayor we see Buffy’s retaliation against this vision of her possible future; Buffy instead chooses to surround herself with friends, distribute her power and share the burden of her destiny.

[9] Season Four’s confrontation with Adam indicates a continuing development in Buffy’s understanding of her own position in both the supernatural and the human realm. Jana Reiss has noted that the unique composition of Adam’s being is a physical manifestation of “Buffy’s worst fear: that she, like him, is a hybrid of both human and demon” (par. 1). In this case, both our hero and our villain stand on similar ground and are rooted in a comparable physiology – tied to both natural

and supernatural states but truly belonging to neither. Given this strange equality, the manner in which Buffy ultimately destroys Adam becomes significant in its relation to the Slayer's place in the human world. When the essences of Giles, Willow, Xander and Buffy merge together, Buffy demonstrates an active choice to root herself in a mortal family and attains exceptional power in this sense of belonging. The fact that the First Slayer haunts the dreams of the Scoobies following this spell, as Elizabeth Kate Switaj notes, is due to the fact that up until Buffy was called, "isolation [had been] so ingrained in the Slayer's identity that...the spell used to defeat Adam fundamentally violated the Slayer's aloneness" (3-4). Indeed, we are repeatedly told that the Slayer must operate alone - "she alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness" - and the First Slayer's hostility confirms that Buffy and her friends are openly defying this traditional system. Importantly, they are also challenging the Watchers' Council's dogma that a Slayer should act alone lest she put others in danger which Switaj proposes is a methodology intended to limit the Slayer's power lest she threaten the authority of the Council themselves.

[10] This disturbing rhetoric is encapsulated through the attitude of Kendra who, having been exposed to this indoctrination from a very young age, has totally internalised its teachings. Buffy, on the other hand, was identified by the Council later in life and, by that time, had already formed strong familial and social ties. She was an integrated member of society before her Slayer training began and this fortunate position grants Buffy the freedom of thought needed to deny the Council's doctrine in a manner that might not have occurred to the Slayers before her. The spell in "Primeval" is also crucial in its foreshadowing of Buffy's revolutionary decision in Season Seven to share her supernatural power among the human community. Moreover, the fact that in both cases the magical medium of a spell is used to share this power demonstrates the strength accessible to the Slayer when she reconciles both the mortal and supernatural sides of herself. Just as Julie Sloan Brannon suggests, "Saving the world...has never really been the heart of Buffy's quest; rather, it is her quest for Selfhood, to understand the power she's got and how to use it" (par. 1). In the Season Four finale, "Restless," the First Slayer tells Buffy that "The Slayer does not walk in this world," and Buffy responds serenely with the words "I walk. I talk. I shop. I sneeze. I'm gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There's trees in the desert since you moved out, and I don't sleep on a bed of bones" (B4022). With these words Buffy explains how different her role as Slayer is to those who have come before. She openly abandons the solitary path of straddling the opposing worlds of mortality and the supernatural, instead converging them into one and sharing the burden of her power with her community.

[11] As Reiss points out, in *Buffy vs. Dracula* we see a continuation of Buffy's belief in human connection as she actively resists Dracula's invitation to "Find it. The darkness. Find your true nature" (B5001), and rejects the acquisition of greater "power through darkness because she rejects its accompanying loss of humanity"

(Reiss, par. 8). However, the remainder of Season Five complicates this gained understanding and Buffy slides back into her earlier pattern of isolation fuelled by a wariness of the mortal world and doubt in its inherent worth. Throughout the course of Season Five we see Buffy lose so much personally in the form of Riley's departure, Joyce's premature death and eventually Dawn's kidnapping that she is pushed to the point of confessing to Giles, "I sacrificed Angel to save the world. I loved him so much, but I knew what was right. I don't have that anymore. I don't understand. I don't know how to live in this world if these are the choices" ("The Gift" B5022).

[12] Riley's human status is extremely significant in this context and has repeatedly been a source of conflict between him and Buffy due to her unwillingness to share all facets of herself with him. Riley feels shut out from the supernatural component of Buffy's existence and the frustration this causes leads him to allow vampire girls to feed off him because 'They needed me,' as opposed to Buffy who refuses to depend on him at all: 'You keep me at a distance, Buffy. You didn't even call me when your Mom went into the hospital!' ("Into the Woods" B5010) Although Buffy verbally maintains that dealing with everything solo is 'part of what being a Slayer is' (B5010) – signalling a notable regression from the lessons learned in "Primeval" – she is still left reeling when he leaves her for a job with the military. Buffy wanted to keep Riley as confined to the human aspect of her world as possible, all cute and "kitteny" ("No Place Like Home" B5005), and his departure implies that this division of worlds is simply not sustainable for a woman in her position. Just as Buffy's first long-term relationship with a "nice, normal guy" ("Doomed" B4011) implodes, her mother dies of a brain aneurysm. This fresh intensity of pain, which emanates purely from the natural world, kindles a new nihilistic attitude toward humanity within Buffy. It is following her mother's death that Buffy begins to lose the ability to understand how the world is worth saving at all, and instead begins to view it as merely "hard, and bright, and violent" ("After Life" B6003), igniting a deeply disaffected outlook that remains with her for some time. Why bother to protect a world that only rewards her with personal loss? In Buffy's own words: "If everything just gets stripped away. I don't see the point." ("The Gift" B5022)

[13] And yet, at the end of the fifth season Buffy actually ends up sacrificing her own life in order to save the rest of humanity - an expression of love for the human world that might seem somewhat inconsistent. Early in the season, it is made clear that Dawn, as The Key, is literally a part of Buffy herself. Buffy reassures Dawn that her blood is "Summers blood. It's just like mine" ("Blood Ties" B5013) and assures Giles that "She's me. The monks made her out of me." ("The Gift" B5022) As Buffy's immediate community falls away she grows more and more protective of her little sister. Dawn is an aptly named liminal character like Buffy herself and it is through her that Buffy finally sees an opportunity to attain true belonging in the mortal world by facilitating Dawn's progression to fully human status. In this sense, Buffy's self-sacrifice at the end of "The Gift" is not an escape from humanity so much as a recalibration of her existence within it. Buffy's final message to Dawn,

therefore, becomes strikingly literal: “Be brave, live, for me” (B5022). Buffy finally understands what the First Slayer meant by “Death is your gift” (“Intervention” B5018) and shares this power with the world, resulting in a meaningful connection to humanity through enabling Dawn to live a fully integrated life.

[14] If Buffy dies contented in “The Gift,” the sixth season of *Buffy* frustratingly reinvigorates that old disconnection from humanity more than ever before. Stevenson has observed that “At the opening of Season Six, her [Buffy’s] body is resurrected, but not her spirit,” which can be interpreted as an indication that the Buffy we see returned to the world has lost any appreciation for human life itself (par. 27). Buffy’s lyrics in “Once More With Feeling,” “I’ve been going through the motions, walking through the part,” (B6007) demonstrate her difficulty in reconnecting with life on earth. The context of her words, sung during patrol in a graveyard, also suggests that Buffy is maintaining her sanity by realigning her focus solely on her function or “part” as the Slayer. The emotional connection with her friends and family that Buffy once enjoyed and that set her apart from all previous Slayers has been severely stifled following her traumatic extraction from heaven. She has difficulty in authentically connecting with her human counterparts. After all, Buffy confesses to Spike that “I was torn out of there (heaven), pulled out, by my friends” (“After Life” B6003), and so demonstrates how little trust she can place in her friends. Spike, however, is not human and, like Angel before him, has much in common with Buffy’s own situation. As a vampire he has always been a liminal being, and now he and Buffy share a similarly complex relationship with death since, in a manner of speaking, both are living out their afterlives. The ensuing relationship between Buffy and Spike grows out of a desire to deaden her connections with her friends as much as possible and she alienates them more than ever before. However, the “eschatological metaphors of death and rebirth that frame the season” (Stevenson, par. 27) are concluded in its final episode “Grave” in which it is finally Dawn who manages to spark an epiphany in Buffy when she stresses that Buffy is unable to shield her from the presence of death: “people I love keep dying! And you cannot protect me from that” (B6022). When Dawn forces this truth upon Buffy she marks a pivotal moment in which Buffy begins to realise how futile it is for her to isolate herself from the machinations of human life. Instead, Buffy resolves to dare to see the beauty in humanity despite the possibility of pain to which such a path leads: “I got it so wrong. I don’t wanna protect you from the world. I wanna show it to you” (B6022). As Stevenson phrases it, “Buffy experiences a spiritual and emotional resurrection from her existential grave,” (par. 27) and relinquishes the nihilistic view of humanity that has plagued her throughout the season.

[15] Compounding Buffy’s epiphany here is the role of the entire Scooby Gang at the latter end of Season Six when each has become absorbed in their individual problems and the cooperative nature of the group has all but disappeared. In “Grave,” Xander is the one to neutralise Dark Willow and Buffy’s presence is not even required for this resolution. Brannon has convincingly proposed that since

Buffy's role in the prevention of this apocalypse is so minimal, the lesson to be taken is that "only through connecting again can the power of the Slayer be fully realised" (par. 9). While the nature of life as the Slayer has repeatedly been described as solitary, in fact, when distanced from her friends, Buffy is often less powerful and less effective in her role. Nevertheless, the reconciliation of Xander and Willow still conveys the power of human connection in this season finale, mirroring Buffy's own realisations. In parallel with Buffy herself, Willow is so overwhelmed by her grief that she feels the only way to make it stop is to denounce the world, but Xander's protestations of unconditional love steer her off this destructive path by driving home the reality that she still has a network of friends who are there to share the burden of her power and her grief.

[16] The sharing of burdens is taken to its logical conclusion at the close of the seventh season when Buffy makes the decision to alter her unique position among the rest of humanity. Instead of being the only Slayer, and therefore often forced to straddle two vying worlds, she chooses to change the rules and become "master of two worlds, the Slayer and that of a 'normal girl'" (Brannon, par. 14). In changing the nature of the Slayer line, Buffy creates a community of similar girls and blurs the line that was once a barrier between herself and the rest of mortality. Brannon surmises this choice perfectly by noting, "Buffy offers another way, one that she has learned over and over again is the only way to be strong: to share the power, to rely on others" (par. 13). This radical alteration of Buffy's destiny has been read by Kim Kirkpatrick not as an attack on the First Evil, but also another offensive on the legacy of the Watchers' Council. She points out that there are parallels between the two and that as soon as the Council is destroyed, Caleb appears and the First takes over the Council's customary reiteration of the solitary nature of Slayers (6). If the First Evil "represents patriarchy itself," as Kirkpatrick argues it does, it becomes all the more important that Buffy defeats the First through the empowerment of her community. As surmised by Switaj, "Through the act of sharing power, this spell overturns the order that has kept isolated Slayers...dominated by the Shadow Men or their successors" and therefore creates an innovative new community which finds untold power in the vanquishing of hierarchy. Buffy certainly has great difficulty in relinquishing her old method of leadership, and even suffers a mutiny because of it, but in the final episode of the series Buffy and her community are no longer ranked, they are linked.

[17] Buffy's complex status as a liminal figure with ties to both the natural and supernatural world theoretically affords her the opportunity to align herself exclusively with either the light or the dark. But strength in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is never gained through the pursuit of just one world, rather it is found in the reconciliation of both and Buffy exceeds the achievements of Slayers before her precisely because she is able to share her mythic powers with others. In this way, *Buffy* openly challenges out-dated and repressive patriarchal systems primarily embodied by the Watchers' Council that seek to isolate those with power to retain their own standing at the top of the hierarchy. Buffy is an exceptional Slayer and it is

understandable that feelings of superiority toward the mortal realm would emerge as she repels threat after supernatural threat. Each of the seven defeats of a “Big Bad” discussed in this essay, however, convey the recurring truth that Buffy is at her strongest when she does away with hierarchy and embraces a new kind of community founded in the sharing of power.

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