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“Lessons” for Season Seven of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*



Will you tell me this riddle: who is the father of lies?
Who is the master of half-truth? What is Madison Avenue?
T-Bone Burnett, *Truth Decay*

“Buffy—duck”

Spike, “Lessons”

[1] Two themes stated for season seven of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by series creator and executive producer Joss Whedon were “Back to the beginning” (“Watch”) and “coming to terms with power and sharing it and enjoying it” (Whedon, “Ending”). It is worth noting that these themes were announced in Spring and Summer of 2002, before or just as filming for season seven began: The “back to the beginning” quote comes from an April news story, and at Mutant Enemy’s “*Buffy Behind the Scenes*” event in June 2002, which was intended to show off the musical episode “Once More with Feeling” (6007) to potential Emmy voters, a fan who attended the event reported that Whedon announced “it was time to get back to what he said was the real theme of the series: *the joy of female empowerment and the sharing of that power*” (Tague). In an interview with the *New York Times* just before the final episode of season seven aired, Whedon stated:

After seven years your mission statement may have changed. Ours remained pretty much the same, or rather came full circle. We looked at the idea of power; the girl who had power that nobody understood, living in high school and how hard that was. We came back to that girl and that concept very strongly in the seventh season on purpose because we knew it was our last. (“10 Questions”)

All these comments seem to indicate, first, that season seven’s major themes were clearly conceptualized by the writers well-ahead of any definite statements that season seven would be the last season or that Sarah Michelle Gellar would be leaving the series, and secondly, that the themes of season seven were highly compatible with a final season, and may have been deliberately chosen with that possibility in mind. What follows is a fairly straightforward (some might say old fashioned) “close reading” of “Lessons,” considering some ways in which this first episode may be viewed as a kind of template for the entire final season of *Buffy*.

[2] It was always very likely that the seventh season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

would be the show's last. *Buffy* had moved from the WB network to UPN in 2001 with a two year contract, and Joss Whedon told *TV Guide* in October 2002, "I'm beginning to suspect that it may be [*Buffy's*] last season [. . .]. Nothing's official, but it's starting to feel possible. The way people are talking, there's a finality to it" ("Buh-Bye"). In addition, rumors arose that Sarah Michelle Gellar might not renew her contract at the end of that second year, and who could seriously imagine *Buffy* without Buffy?¹ The stakes for season seven, therefore, were as high if not higher than the stakes for season five, the show's last season on the WB network, which ended with Buffy's spectacular second death ("The Gift," 5022), and fan expectations were thus somewhat overwrought, perhaps unreasonably so. Many were already displeased or distressed by directions the show had taken in season six, particularly Buffy's lengthy depression following her reluctant resurrection, Buffy's dysfunctional relationship with Spike, the "Three Stooges" of villainy (Warren, Jonathan, and Andrew), and especially the death of Tara, which provoked enormous controversy as soon as it was "spoiled," long before "Seeing Red" (6019) actually aired.²

[3] Whedon, though famous for having said, "Don't give people what they want, give them what they need" (Interview, Tasha Robinson), seems to have felt that fans both needed and wanted assurance that season seven would be "lighter" than season six ("Watch"), although he had previously defended his and Marti Noxon's season six story arc, which he acknowledged had been fairly grim: "I told Marti, 'You know, I've been thinking, and I think next year we should go back to, like...that very positive message that we had at the very beginning of the show, and really see Buffy empowered again, instead of seeing her at the mercy of her life'" (Lee). The first episode of season seven, "Lessons," seems to epitomize these promises, but Whedon also jokingly credited himself with "a thing I have personally devised called a 'plot twist'" (Wright). Those who geared up happily for a season of Dawn, Kit, and Carlos as bouncy junior Scoobies dealing with various metaphorical teen monsters-of-the-week, aided by counselor/Slayer Buffy at newly rebuilt Hellmouth High may have been disappointed again when season seven rapidly turned nearly as grim as season six. Much like Buffy startled by newly ensouled Spike in the high school basement, after six years with Joss Whedon's team of writers, viewers should know to be ready to duck when he says things will be fine. The lessons of "Lessons" turn out to be stated quite plainly—virtually hitting us on the head—but it would take the entire season to learn them.

[4] Two important elements of season seven which "Lessons" illustrates are the vital necessity of listening carefully to words, which will often have more than one meaning, and the need to watch carefully for visual clues and references. In the course of the episode, several points are made regarding listening and watching, each of which is echoed or reflected in various ways as the season continues, culminating in the series finale, "Chosen" (7022), an objective that influenced the intervening episodes, according to Whedon (Interview, "The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator"). In addition, "Lessons" signals that season seven may be about new beginnings, but it will also be very much about the past, the history of the entire series and its invented back-story. *Buffy* is a show that from at least its second season has increasingly rewarded the attentive viewer with intertextual and metatextual references, and often baffled the casual channel-surfer, and perhaps never more than in season seven, which continually alluded to past seasons and episodes and gave false clues about where it was going. In "Get It Done" (7015), the importance of watching carefully will be spelled out as "You can't just watch, you have to see." A corollary key to "Lessons" might be phrased as, "You can't just listen, you have to hear." Though some details along the way may have been altered by circumstances or other considerations,³ the essential elements of the final episode seem never to have been in question, and "Lessons" provides a remarkable

number of clues as to what signposts to watch for and when the viewer, perhaps, should have ducked.

Back to the beginning

[5] As most *Buffy* fans and scholars know, the show began with Whedon's vision of the stereotypical horror movie's frail blonde girl going into a dark alley with a menacing assailant, and then—"she's not only ready for him, she trounces him" ("Joss Whedon"). "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1001) starts with a twist on that scenario: the seemingly helpless blonde turns out to be a vampire, Darla. "Lessons" opens on a variation of the cliché itself: a terrified girl fleeing through dark alleys, pursued by hooded figures. After six years of triumphant Buffy, perhaps the viewer expects the girl to escape, or to turn and defeat her enemies; instead, the attackers surround and kill her, reminding viewers of Whedon's elementary principle from "Welcome to the Hellmouth" (1001): "The idea is always to try and surprise them, to subvert the obvious" ("Commentary"). "Lessons" concludes with the First Evil (though the audience is not meant to guess what it is yet) manifesting itself as the past seasons' villains in reverse order, taking viewers "right back to the beginning," according to The Master vampire of season one. It's appropriate for The Master, one of the oldest vampires, to speak about "the beginning," as the first and final opponents the First will call up against the Slayer are "Turok-Han" (familarly known as the "über-vamps"), primordial vampires that are much harder to kill than modern vampires.

[6] The opening and closing scenes of "Lessons" contain only two of the "back to the beginning" allusions that almost every episode in season seven will refer to in various ways. We'll get scenes from the complete biography of Anyanka the vengeance demon in "Selfless" (7005) that also allude to seasons five ("Triangle," 5009) and six ("Once More," 6007), and a vital missing piece of Spike's vampire history in "Lies My Parents Told Me" (7017); reformed rogue vampire slayer Faith⁴ will return to Sunnydale, as will Angel;⁵ Buffy and Dawn's mother, Joyce, will reappear (either as a ghost or as an apparition of the First Evil,⁶ or in Buffy's dreams⁷), and the apparitions of several of the past seasons' villains will turn up again as well. All these returning characters and references to the past continually remind viewers how the show and the characters have changed through its seven year run. As *Mutant Enemy* writer Jane Espenson describes it:

Our agenda at the very beginning of this year overall was [. . .] to return to high school, and [the first few episodes] had that first-season feel to them, but our characters have been through so much and have suffered such losses that we couldn't maintain that lighthearted, it's-all-a-big-fun-metaphor for much of the year, but we came into it with that agenda of getting off on a lighter foot [. . .] because the high-school-as-hell metaphor is the strongest the series ever had. (*Succubus Club*)

Thus, the "back to the beginning" theme seems more and more ironic as the season progresses, or as viewers come to realize how impossible that nostalgic dream always is.

"It's about power. [. . .] Who's got it. Who knows how to use it."

[7] The opening and closing scenes of "Lessons" end with the phrase "It's about power." In both cases, the speaker is Buffy—Buffy herself, teaching Dawn how to fight vampires, and at the end, the First Evil appearing as Buffy. Buffy has always been the girl with the power—"one girl in all the world, a Chosen One, one born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires..." ("Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1001). Nevertheless, the message has been delivered again and again that although Buffy is

unique (despite the secondary callings of Kendra ["What's My Line" 1-2, 2009-10] and Faith ["Faith, Hope and Trick," 3003]), she is not, in fact, alone (Clark and Miller). She has friends and family, and these characters have developed their own powers, or at least their own talents and skills. "Who's got [power?] Who knows how to use it[?]" are questions for almost every character in the course of season seven.

[8] Since "Lessons" opens with her, let's first focus on Dawn, who was introduced as an interdimensional key disguised as a fourteen-year-old girl in season five; in season seven she's a high-school girl (the same age as Buffy in "Welcome to the Hellmouth," 1001), trying to find her place in the strangest household in Sunnydale, maybe the world. Could she be a vampire slayer like her sister? The opening scene of "Lessons" hints that she might be, with Buffy teaching her how to fight vampires, but since "Potential" (7012) reveals that Dawn is not a future Slayer, it makes more sense to read Dawn in this episode as pre-figuring the Potential Slayers whom Buffy will teach in later episodes ("Showtime," 7011; "Potential"). Rather, Dawn must discover her own path. At the end of season six, Buffy, recovering her sense of self, her calling, and her *joie de vivre*, promised Dawn:

Things have really sucked lately, but that's all gonna change—and I want to be there when it does. [. . .] I want to see you grow up. The woman you're gonna become... Because she's gonna be beautiful. And she's gonna be powerful. I got it so wrong. I don't want to protect you from the world—I wanna show it to you. There's so much that I want to show you. ("Grave," 6022)

Buffy's vampire-slaying tutorial is undoubtedly an effort to carry out this promise, but her overwhelming instinct, especially as Dawn returns to Sunnydale High on the Hellmouth, is to "make sure it's safe for my sister" ("Lessons," 7001).⁸ Although Dawn still needs her sister's help in "Lessons," in succeeding episodes she continues to resist Buffy's "protection" in subtle, but increasingly effective ways, mostly off-screen. At intervals, we see that she has discovered a talent for the kind of research and linguistic skills that enable her to taken on Giles's role in emergency spell-casting ("Conversations," 7007) and explaining ancient texts and rituals ("Get It Done," 7015), so that she is calling herself "Watcher Junior" by the end of the season ("Chosen," 7022). Dawn steps up most decisively as a leader, not just a follower or observer, in "Empty Places," and perhaps hers is the only voice Buffy will hear at this point:

DAWN: Buffy, I love you, but you were right. We have to be together on this. You can't be a part of it. So I need you to leave. I'm sorry, but this is my house, too.

[Buffy looks around, then walks out the front door.]

RONA: Ding dong, the witch is dead.

DAWN: [sharply] Shut your mouth. (7019)

[10] "Lessons" subtly foreshadows this scene in reverse, as "Plin" points out, with Dawn's breezy farewell to Buffy at the entry to Sunnydale High: "DAWN: I know! You never know what's coming, the stake is not the power, *To Serve Man* is a cookbook. **I love you. Go away!**" (7001; emphasis added). When Buffy tries to save Dawn from the final apocalyptic showdown with the forces of the First Evil, we

learn that Dawn has wasted little time worrying about what Joyce's cryptic prophecy meant ("When it's bad, Buffy won't choose you. She'll be against you" ["Conversations," 7007]), or whether it was true or false, but has simply prepared herself by acquiring a taser, which she uses to stop Xander from taking her away from Sunnydale ("End of Days," 7021).⁹ After spending most of seasons five and six whining or screeching, and lying and shoplifting in desperate attempts to get some attention, Dawn claims her own identity in season seven, much as Buffy did in season one. After a few false starts, in which she, like any other Sunnydale student, is at the mercy of the Hellmouth—transformed to a life-size, pose-able "Skipper" doll by Gnarl's paralyzing venom in "Same Time, Same Place" (7003), falling under the spell of R.J.'s letter-jacket of love in "Him" (7006)—Dawn never looks back.

[11] Before leaving the scene of Buffy and Dawn in the cemetery, another significant element must be noted. The vampire rising from his grave may foreshadow the dire "über-vamps" to come or The First itself, but he is ironically "stuck—could use some help" ("Lessons," 7001). Dawn thinks "he's got the power" (7001), but repeatedly throughout season seven we'll be shown that as a "big bad," a villain to end all villains, the insubstantial First Evil only has as much power as it is given by its corporeal "Bringers"—notes Andrew, "[T]hey're very mobile for blind people [. . .]" ("Storyteller," 7016)—and, more significantly, by those who allow themselves to be swayed by its line of flattery and appeals to greed, lust, jealousy, anger, hatred, and fear. Nevertheless, these emotions and desires are "real—that's the only lesson, it's always real" ("Lessons," 7001), which has always been the "lesson" of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Buffy kindly helps the apparently ineffectual vampire, and he almost kills Dawn when she stakes him but misses the heart; the First Evil seems like a lame "big bad," but the emotions it raises and the actions they can motivate are fatal, or nearly fatal, to more than one of the "good guys." "Lessons" has more to say about the nature of the season's villain, however, as will become clear.

It's all connected

[12] The second theme announced for season seven was, "coming to terms with power and sharing it and enjoying it" ("Ending"). "Lessons" refers repeatedly to "connection," beginning with Willow's conjured Peruvian flower: "It's all connected. The root systems, the molecules...the energy. Everything's connected." These references will continue throughout season seven, sometimes through puns and other hints. Giles's and Willow's scenes are full of these freighted lines: "WILLOW: Is there anything you don't know everything about? GILES: Synchronized swimming. Complete mystery to me" (7001). As a watcher, Giles has been trained to guide one girl; working with the "unusual" Buffy has made him an outcast even among Watchers. Season seven will develop the value of team work—"synchronized swimming"—something Giles knows nothing about, but which he—and indeed, all the characters—will have to learn in order to help the remaining Slayers-in-Training and to survive "what's to come" ("Restless," 4022).

[13] The next Giles and Willow scene finds Willow on the ground, apparently staggered by a sudden dreadful mystical experience, as Giles supports her:

WILLOW: I felt the Earth. It's all connected. It is, but it's not all good and pure and rooty. There's deep, deep black. There's...I saw, I saw the Earth, Giles. I saw its teeth.

GILES: The hell mouth.

WILLOW: It's gonna open. It's gonna swallow us all.

Notice that Willow's terrified position in this scene:



("Lessons," 7001 [*Just Imagine*])

is very similar to her happily exhausted "That was nifty!" position in the principal's office above the Hellmouth after she successfully "connects" via the Slayer's Scythe to empower all the Potentials in "Chosen" (7022):



("Chosen," 7022 [*Just Imagine*])

and the earth does *not* swallow them all, though there are certainly great losses.

[14] Another symbol of connection in "Lessons" is the cell-phone Buffy gives to Dawn. "DAWN: It's a weapon, isn't it? BUFFY: Yes, it is" (7001).¹⁰ Communication as a weapon? Certainly many of the issues of season six involved lack of communication, most of which were encapsulated in "Once More with Feeling," in which people found themselves compelled to sing about things they were afraid or unwilling to talk about (6007). "Plin" notes that although the cell-phone is indeed effective in "Lessons" ("DAWN: Buffy? Isn't this reception amazing?" [7001]), "as the season progresses the cell is used to show Buffy increasingly cut off from her circle." In "Conversations with Dead People," Buffy loses it in the graveyard, and it rings uselessly as she insistently tells vampire psychologist Holden Webster, "I'm connected. I'm connected to a lot of people, OK.[. . .] I really am." (7007); in "Potential," Willow wants to call Buffy with the news that Dawn is a future Slayer, but "we can't," Xander remembers. "She didn't bring a cell phone" (7012). In "First Date," there are two cell-phone snafus: when the Scoobies attempt to contact Buffy after foiling the First Evil's attempt to subvert Andrew, they find she has left her phone behind and is once again, "[n]ot so much connected" ("Conversations," 7007), while simultaneously Xander's encoded text-message appears on Willow's cell, but she can't remember what it means:

WILLOW: Uh, this one's either "I just got lucky, don't call me for a while" or "my date's a demon who's trying to kill me."

KENNEDY: You don't remember which?

WILLOW: It was a long time ago.

DAWN: Well, if we play the percentages...

GILES: Something's eating Xander's head. (7014)

At least they remember that much. In "End of Days" (7021), Buffy will finally admit, "The good guys are not traditionally known for their communication skills," but her very acknowledgment demonstrates that she has reached the point where she is willing and able to connect in new ways. She will stop lecturing and start talking (except to Dawn, who has one more journey of her own to make).

[15] Perhaps the most significant representation of connection in "Lessons" is one that is easy to miss, but can be followed through succeeding episodes until it comes full circle to return to its origin. Buffy, having fought her way through the "manifest spirits" to get to a room in the high school basement where she believes she'll find Dawn, prepares to kick open the door only to be confronted by a disheveled Spike, clearly the last person she expected. "Buffy," he says blankly, reaching out to touch her cheek, "duck—" (7001). James Marsters, as Spike, keeps the intonation perfectly neutral, so that the viewer and the startled Buffy are momentarily suspended among three possible interpretations—the British endearment, a warning to "duck!" or Buffy's stunned "What? Duck? There's a duck?"—before she is bashed by a the spirit-janitor. It's a beautiful moment of verbal play, but the real key is the ever-so-brief gesture of physical connection:



("Lessons," 7001 [*Just Imagine*])

[16] Cassie reaches out to Buffy with this same gesture in "Help," assuring her, "you will [make a difference]" (7004); when Joyce touches the dreaming Buffy in "Bring on the Night," Buffy wakes up cupping her own face—



(7010 [*Just Imagine*])

Joyce's appearance in Buffy's dreams representing both the memory of her mother's love and Buffy's own "mother wit," telling her what she knows instinctively, although she's not ready to accept it yet (7010). In "Get It Done," the shaman gives Buffy the knowledge she asks for with the same simple touch after she rejects his attempt to fill her with additional demonic "slayer power" (7015); in "Touched" (7020), Spike, now in full possession of his faculties, touches Buffy's face again, saying "Hey, look at me"—a variation on "You can't just watch, you have to see" ("Get It Done,"

7015). In the same episode, Faith connects with Robin Wood with a variation on the same gesture, taking his hand and bringing it to her face: "FAITH: Been awhile. Am I out of line? PRINCIPAL WOOD: Hey, you're the leader" (7020). And finally in "Chosen," Buffy brings the circle of connection back around to Spike, as she reaches out to him after giving him the champion's amulet, not going up the stairs as she did in "The Gift," when she was still, indeed, "unattainable" and he was a "monster" she "treat[ed...] like a man" (5022).



("Chosen," 7022 [*Just Imagine*])

The significant element in all but one of these scenes is that the connections are emotional and/or intellectual; even Faith and Wood's encounter, which may appear to be purely physical, indicates the beginning of a deeper bond between them, although Faith is reluctant to admit it initially ("Chosen," 7022).

"We all are who we are..."

[17] Willow's and Giles's first scene ends with another seemingly significant line from Giles: "In the end, we all are who we are, no matter how much we may appear to have changed" ("Lessons, 7001), and an immediate cut to Xander in a business suit, looking "unconscionably spiffy," says Buffy, even suavely "double-O-Xander," according to Dawn (7001). And indeed, Xander will remain "The man who is the heart of the Slayer machine," in the slightly heightened rhetoric of Andrew's "Monsterpiece Theatre" documentary ("Storyteller," 7016). Fans warily speculated that successful Xander in a suit must be about to turn evil, but his "I'm good" seemed to have a double meaning this time—Xander remains good in season seven, though he is also, as usual, naïve in assessing the newly rebuilt Sunnydale high school to be "safe as houses" (7001). When have houses in Sunnydale ever been safe?

[18] Who else has not really changed? Anyanka the off-and-on-again vengeance demon tries to defend her job performance when her colleague Halfrek point out, "No deaths. No eviscerations. You're not goading women into anything inventive, and you're not delivering when it is" ("Lessons," 7001). Anyanka's emotional links

to ex-fiancé Xander and his friends are stronger than she thought they were; she will rescind one of her wishes for Xander's sake, and admit to Willow,

ANYA: [. . .] the vengeance itself, i-it's not as fulfilling as I remember.

WILLOW: Really? 'Cause I got the impression that you enjoyed—you know, inflicting.

ANYA: Well, causing pain sounds really cool, I know, but turns out it's really upsetting. Didn't use to be, but now it is. ("Same Time, Same Place," 7003)

And she finally asks to be released from "the vengeance fold," even if the price must be her own life ("Selfless," 7005). The fact that the price turns out to be her demon friend Halfrek's life does not negate Anyanka's self-sacrificial intent. Nevertheless, Anya maintains her screen of sarcasm almost to the bitter end: "Spike's got some sort of "Get Out of Jail Free" card that doesn't apply to the rest of us. I mean, he could slaughter a hundred frat boys, and— [everyone looks at Anya, who actually did slaughter a large number of fraternity boys in "Selfless"; Anya laughs it off] Forgiveness makes us human—blah-dee-blah-blah-blah" ("Lies," 7017). At last, Andrew finds a common thread with her as they raid the abandoned hospital for medical supplies:

ANDREW: So how come you're here? I mean, you could just go, right? [...W]hat's different?

ANYA: Well, I guess I was kinda new to being around humans before. But now I've seen a lot more, gotten to know people, seen what they're capable of and...I guess I just realized how amazingly screwed up they all are. I mean, really, really screwed up in a monumental fashion. [. . .]

And they have no purpose that unites them so they just drift around blundering through life until they die...which they know is coming yet every single one of them is surprised when it happens to them. They're incapable of thinking about what they want beyond the moment. They kill each other, which is clearly insane...and yet here's the thing. When it's something that really matters, they fight. I mean, they're lame morons for fighting, but they do. They never...they never quit. So I guess I will keep fighting, too.

ANDREW: That was kind of beautiful. You love humans.

ANYA: I do not!

ANDREW: Yes, you do. [sing-song] You love them...

ANYA: Stop it! I don't love them and I'll kill you if you tell anybody.

ANDREW: I won't tell anybody. I won't get a chance to, anyway.

ANYA: I don't know, you might survive.

ANDREW: No, you might survive. You know how to handle a weapon and you've been in this world for like a thousand years. I'm not so...

[sighs] I don't think I'll be okay. I'm cool with it. I think I'd like to finish out as one of those lame humans trying to do what's right.

ANYA: [smiles] Yeah.

ANDREW: So...wheelchair fight? ("End of Days," 7021)

Andrew perceives that despite her protests, Anya has come to love humans, but that he won't get her to admit it by arguing. Anya's seasonal arc is yet another example of "you can't just listen, you have to hear" and "you can't just watch, you have to see." In almost every episode after "Selfless," her actions speak louder than her words: she remains in the Summers house and helps care for and train the Potential Slayers. She may call the Potentials "cannon fodder," but "Not to their faces. What am I—insensitive?" ("Chosen," 7022); and she can't stop caring about Xander; ultimately, they reconcile ("Storyteller," 7016, "Touched," 7020).

[19] "We all are who we are" is a kind of promise, as well, to viewers who were exhausted by the despairing Buffy of season six that the Slayer's second emergence from her grave is permanent. She really is "alive," no longer "going through the motions" ("Once," 6007). Nevertheless, to have written season seven's "back to the beginning" Buffy as regaining the kind of sophomoric, frothy girlishness she had in seasons one and two would not have been consistent with the way Mutant Enemy writers have shown characters to be changed by experience. As Joss Whedon explained in an interview with IGN.com:

In season seven, it wasn't like we weren't going to put her through her paces. Buffy in pain is a staple of the show from season one. As [David] Greenwalt and I told each other very early on—"Buffy in pain, story more interesting. Buffy not in pain, story not interesting." So we couldn't just have her be like, "La-di-da, do-di-do, all is well," for a season, because—hey, show not about that. The dark place we took her to was about, "I'm accepting my power, my responsibility, and my leadership, and those are hard things to deal with." So, inevitably, she got kind of bummed out, because that's how you tell the story. The hero goes through something and then they resolve it. (Interview, "The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator")

Part of the "going through something" included the "bummed out" responses of Buffy's friends and family, who also found her "I'm the law" leadership style jarring, and her speeches boring and less-than-helpful: in the beautifully constructed and hilarious metafiction-within-the-fiction, "Storyteller," Andrew ducks out as Buffy begins pontificating: "ANDREW: Honestly, gentle viewers, these motivating speeches of hers tend to get a little long. I'll take you back in there in—in a little while.[. . .] She's not done. Even Willow looks bored, and she usually can take a lot of that stuff" (7016).

[20] Buffy herself hates what she has become—the role of commandant is clearly not natural to her, and she keeps trying to find more effective ways to deal with a threat that she cannot touch, to protect girls who remind her so much of Dawn that she is afraid to get close to them—"You can't protect her," the dead girl's spirit tells Buffy in "Lessons," "You couldn't protect me" (7001). Even if these "manifest spirits" are not direct apparitions of the First Evil, they talk like it—reminding people of past failures, feeding their fears, and sapping their hopes. Buffy's lessons will be to learn that Dawn can protect herself, and to let herself love even those she may lose—the lesson of the First Slayer—

GUIDE: You are full of love. You love with all your soul. It's brighter than the fire, blinding. That's why you pull away from it.

BUFFY: I'm full of love? I'm not losing it?

GUIDE: Only if you reject it. Love is pain and the slayer forges strength from pain. Love. Give. Forgive. Risk the pain. It is your nature. For it will bring you to your gift. ("Intervention," 5018)

Among several ways this prophecy may be read as borne out in season seven is Buffy's evasion of Caleb and discovery of the Slayer's Scythe, after she finally *hears* Spike assure her:

When I say I love you, it's not because I want you, or because I can't have you. It has nothing to do with me. I love what you are, what you do, how you try. I've seen your kindness and your strength. I've seen the best and the worst of you and I understand with perfect clarity exactly what you are. You are a hell of a woman. You're the one, Buffy. ("Touched," 7020)

Even though she protests automatically, "I don't want to be the one," she is able to ask Spike to "just hold me"—something she would never have done before—and to sleep at last, as Joyce told her she must in "Bring on the Night" (7010). The following day, she finally finds "the strength and skill" to evade Caleb instead of attacking him directly, attacks which previously allowed him to smash her with his superior strength ("Buffy, duck!"), and to take the Scythe from its Excalibur-like hiding-place under the vineyard: love leads her to her gift.

"There's always a talisman."

[21] The "manifest spirits" Buffy battles in "Lessons" have been raised by a mysterious talisman: "DAWN: How'd you know it was a talisman? BUFFY: *There's always a talisman*. The real question is who put it there" (7001, emphasis added). Much grumbling among fans because the origin of this talisman was never revealed,¹¹ but if we consider "Lessons" primarily as a thematic template for the season, the talisman itself is the important thing, foreshadowing several other objects that channel supernatural power or call up supernatural entities which feature significantly in later episodes: R.J.'s letter jacket is a kind of talisman of high school popularity and success, handed down from father to son ("Him," 7004); Willow uses D'Hoffryn's talisman, given to her in "Something Blue" (4009), to summon him and bargain for the return of Anyanka to humanity in "Selfless" (7005); the knife Andrew uses to murder Jonathan, and the "Seal of Danzalthar" on the Hellmouth may be interpreted as talismans ("Conversations," 7007; "Bring on the Night," 7010); in "Get It Done," Buffy breaks the power of the primeval "Shadow Men" by breaking the leader's staff in a gesture parallel to Xander's in breaking the "Lessons" talisman, saying, "I knew it. It's always the staff" (7015); the Slayer's Scythe becomes a talisman when Willow uses it to channel Slayer power to all potential Slayers ("Chosen," 7022); and finally, Angel brings the "champion's" amulet to Buffy, which will enable Spike to "do the cleanup" of the Hellmouth by channeling "purifying power...cleansing power...possibly scrubbing bubbles" ("Chosen," 7022). The real question is who put *this* talisman into Angel's hands—evil law firm Wolfram and Hart, or someone else using W&H as

go-between—and whether that agent originally meant it to be worn by Angel, or by Spike, who—thanks to the amulet and a mysterious delivery service—is revived on *Angel* and continuing to work out his own salvation (with minimal evidence of fear and trembling) (“Conviction,” A5001).

Of dogs and mothers

[22] The final scene of the “teaser” introduces a new character, the new principal of the rebuilt Sunnydale High School, Robin Wood, who will become a key figure of the season. His meetings with Buffy in “Lessons” yield two more lines that direct viewers attention both forward and backward. I deal with these in reverse order of occurrence and importance:

[23] As Buffy and Principal Wood discuss Buffy’s high school record and Dawn’s future, they are interrupted by Buffy’s cell-phone ringing—Dawn calling from the high school basement. The scene is played for humor as Buffy tries to invent a cover story:

BUFFY: Excuse me. Yeah. [to Principal] Oh, sorry. My dog. Uh, dog walker. [Quietly, into phone] Three dead?

PRINCIPAL: Oh, my God!

BUFFY: Uh, no, I’ll be right there.

PRINCIPAL: Your dogs are dead?

DAWN: And, Buffy? Isn’t this reception amazing? I’m in the freakin’ basement!

BUFFY: OK. Sorry about that. I—I have to...

PRINCIPAL: Yeah. No, of course. And good luck with that...dog tragedy.

It seems like just a funny scene, until episode two, “Beneath You,” in which a literal “dog tragedy” occurs—a Yorkshire terrier is eaten by a giant worm (one of Anyanka’s vengeance victims).

[24] References to dogs turn up again in episode three, “Same Time, Same Place,” as Spike continues proving his ensouled reformation by acting as “bloodhound” to find Willow:

XANDER: Should’ve put a leash on him.

BUFFY: Yes, let’s tie ourselves to the crazy vampire.

XANDER: You really think it’s gonna work?

BUFFY: It’s pretty easy. Spike follows the exciting smell of blood, and we follow the fairly ripe smell of Spike.

At this point, the alert viewer might want to review the history of vampires as “dogs” on *Buffy*; it is quite considerable, and goes “right back to the beginning” with the Master’s sarcastic dismissal of Jesse as an “offering” in “The Harvest”: “You’ve tasted it. I’m your. . .faithful dog. You bring me scraps” (1002). Angel calls a pack of vampires “dogs” (“Angel,” 1007); Drusilla calls Angel “bad dog” (“What’s My Line” 2, 2010); Spike is famously, or infamously, “love’s bitch, but [. . .] man enough to admit it” (“Lover’s Walk,” 3008); Angel is “the puppy” Vampire Willow tortures in

"The Wish" (3009); Buffy tells Parker that the scar on her neck from Angel's bite came from an "angry puppy" and Oz uses the same term as a code to alert her that Harmony has been turned into a vampire ("Harsh Light," 4003); Dru tells Spike that his "[chip] tells you you're not a bad dog, but you are" ("Crush," 5014). Principal Wood, when given a chance to avenge the death of his mother by staking Spike, incites him with "That's right, dog. Fight back" ("Lies," 7017). In addition to the vampire "dogs," the name of the fallen preacher, Caleb, means "dog" in Hebrew—if the choice of names is coincidental, it is nevertheless remarkable. The role of Robin Wood as villain or hero may have been undecided when "Lessons" was written, and perhaps whether Spike would survive the end of the season was also undetermined at that time; nevertheless, by the time "Chosen" was written, "Good luck with that dog tragedy" certainly seems to have become another significant line.

[25] When Wood first meets Buffy, he assumes she is Dawn's mother: "You seem a bit young to have such a gown-up daughter" ("Lessons," 7001). Although he soon admits that he has "heard of" Buffy—and will eventually confess that he knew all along that she was the Slayer—here is the foreshadowing of Wood as the son of Nikki, the "subway Slayer" of "Fool for Love" (5007).¹² His error sends Buffy to check her appearance in the mirror: "It's not 'mom hair'"—but like so many statements made in "Lessons," in some senses, the opposite is true—Dawn was made from Buffy, according to the monks who made the "key" human ("No Place Like Home," 5005); Buffy will soon find herself in the uncomfortable position of "mother" to a houseful of slayerettes; and finally in "Chosen," the First-as-Buffy addresses her as "Mommy"—which brings us back to the question of the nature of the season's villain (7022).

[26] What is the First Evil? Begin with its original textual description in season three's "Amends": "Absolute evil, older than man, than demons [. . .] Beyond sin, beyond death. I am the thing the darkness fears. You'll never see me, but I am everywhere. Every being, every thought, every drop of hate" (3010). Well, that seems simple enough. Nothing seriously contradicts this in season seven, though the First does change its operating methods somewhat, adding the vicious fallen preacher Caleb to its roster of physical servants. What remains constant, however, is the First's devotion to sowing discord amongst the "faithful," its insistence that each of them, particularly Buffy is "alone," and its desire to absorb everything into itself. Thomas Hibbs commented on the consistent portrayal of evil on *Buffy* as season six ended: "By contrast to goodness and in parasitic dependence on it, evil involves isolation from the rest of humanity, a closing off of the possibility of love, friendship, and communication; it is a will to raw, unconstrained power, a nihilistic drive to destroy all that is, including oneself." The First Evil, naturally, intensifies all these qualities, and "Lessons" appropriately concludes with the reappearance of this force morphing through the past seasons' villains, from Warren, to Glory, to Adam, to the Mayor, to Drusilla (representing season two), to the Master. Interestingly, this is the last time the First Evil will appear as most of these "Bads," with the exception of Warren (twice more, once in a flashback), Drusilla (twice), and the Mayor (once); it appears as Caleb once. The First instead prefers to manifest as deceased "good guys": Buffy, Jonathan, Potential Slayers Eve and Chloe, Joyce, Cassie, Nikki, and even Spike, who, if not exactly good, is at least working towards it now that he has a soul. One might simply dismiss this as mere casting availability coincidence; but it actually makes sense both in terms of the plot—evil disguising itself as good people confuses the protagonists, obviously—and in terms of the Augustinian definition of evil Hibbs draws on, evil as dependent on goodness for its very existence-- it "has no positive nature" (Augustine, *City of God* xi.9). Thus, Buffy, the guiding light of the Buffyverse, more than any other "good" character, is the First Evil's "mommy" ("Chosen," 7022), not because Buffy is evil—though she

certainly is not perfect—but because evil cannot be self-existent, though it likes to think it is.

[27] The First, manifesting as each preceding season's villain, concludes season seven's "Lessons" with a speech that is both typical of the character and foreboding of something greater, and reveals more about the nature of evil:

MORPHING EVIL THING [as WARREN]: Of course she won't understand, Sparky. I'm beyond her understanding. She's a girl. Sugar and spice and everything...useless unless you're baking. I'm more than that. More than flesh...

MORPHING EVIL THING [as GLORY]: ...more than blood. I'm...you know, I honestly don't think there's a human word fabulous enough for me. Oh, my name will be on everyone's lips, assuming their lips haven't been torn off. But not just yet. That's all right, though...

[28] There are elements of truth in all the Big Bad personae's statements, and some of them are truths that it may not be aware of itself: Buffy herself hasn't yet figured out that she's "baking," however unfortunate the analogy may be ("Chosen," 7022); everyone does seem to be saying "From beneath you, it devours" over the next several episodes, in English, Spanish, and German,¹³ but—so what? The significance of First-as-Dru's "little songs" will become apparent in "Sleeper" and "Lies My Parents Told Me" (7008, 7017), and the Master is correct in saying that "we're all going to learn something about ourselves in the process," but the fact that Spike (and most of the Scoobies, in fact) are "pathetic schmuck[s]" is just one step in the process, not the whole story. When various characters encounter the First Evil in various guises, they often ask something like, "did The First tell the truth?" ("Touched," 7020), 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. For example, when the First-as-Cassie tells Willow, "You're not gonna be okay. You're gonna kill everybody." This is a complete lie, but it is a true statement of Willow's fears and probably contributes to the painful side-effects of her insecure spell-casting efforts in the early part of the season. When the First tells Principal Wood that Spike killed his mother, Nikki, that is quite true; it omits the information that Spike has since acquired a soul, since the only purpose is to inflame Wood's lifelong quest for revenge on "the monster who took my mother away from me" ("Lies," 7017). The First-as-Warren entices the vulnerable, lovelorn Andrew to murder Jonathan with visions of godhood, and appeals to his heroic fantasies with *Star Wars* allusions:

ANDREW: Do you have any idea how hard it's been to act this cool?

WARREN: Calm down, you're doing great. All specs are within parameters.

ANDREW: You keep leaving me. I hate it when you leave me. One time you died, and I ended up a Mexican.

WARREN: We've been over this. Now, that death thing was all part of the master plan. Come on, "If you strike me down..."

ANDREW: [Alec Guinness impression] "I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine." [laughs] Of course. Do you think, maybe, Willow could kill me, too?

WARREN: Hey, don't worry. If short round pulls off his end of the bargain, we'll both become gods. ("Conversations," 7007)

[29] Although the First Evil goes to great lengths to portray itself as all-powerful, telling Willow, for example, "This last year's gonna seem like cake after what I put you and your friends through, and I am not a fan of easy death" ("Conversations," 7007), or promising Caleb to make him a god, just as it had evidently earlier promised Andrew and Jonathan, in the persona of Warren ("Storyteller," 7016; "End of Days," 7021)—it cannot carry out these promises, or only partially—certainly, suffering, torture, and deaths are inflicted, but not on the scale implied by the First's portents. As Buffy comments when finally confronted by an apparition of First-as-(deceased)-Caleb in season seven (she dismissed it with greater insouciance in season three's "Amends," but she was a different girl then): "Have you ever considered a cool name? I mean, since you're incorporeal and basically powerless. . . how about the Taunter?" ("Chosen," 7022). Its army of Turok-han "über-vamps" and its preference (or limitation) for appearing only in the insubstantial forms of those who have died is reminiscent of Simone Weil's comment on the

[m]onotony of evil: never anything new, everything about it is equivalent. Never anything real, everything about it is imaginary. It is because of this monotony that quantity plays so great a part.[. . .] One is condemned to false infinity. That is hell itself. (119)

It is this Augustinian quality of the First Evil, that is at least one element of its failure. When it taunts Buffy with the one essential truth of her nature, wearing the face and body of an "equivalent" Slayer, repeating the formula she's heard so many times since her calling that it long ago became mere "blah, blah, blah" ("Welcome," 1001), Buffy's response is not the expected helplessness:

THE FIRST/BUFFY: "Into every generation a Slayer is born. One girl in all the world. She alone will have the strength and skill to..." There's that word again. What you are. How you'll die. Alone. [silence] Where's your snappy comeback?

BUFFY: You're right.

THE FIRST/BUFFY: Hmm...not your best.

[. . .]

BUFFY: No. [beat] Yeah. I just realized something. Something that really never occurred to me before. We're going to win. ("Chosen," 7022)

There's an important shift in Buffy's thinking: whereas in almost every scene before she's talked in terms of "I"—"I" can't protect these girls, "I" can't defeat the First—here for almost the first time she says, "we're gonna win." What was meant to instill despair sparks the inspiration for the empowerment of all the world's potential slayers, snapping into place the final mental and emotional connections Buffy and the others need. The First never sees that coming, just as its devotee Caleb, though his first traps work well enough, can never imagine that "just a girl" can possibly defeat him; as W.H. Auden noted (in his 1956 review of Tolkien's *The Return of the King*), "Evil [. . .] has every advantage but one—it is inferior in imagination. Good can imagine the possibility of becoming evil [. . .] but Evil, defiantly chosen, can no longer imagine anything but itself."

[30] Another interesting feature of the First's "Lessons" speech is its praise of incorporeality: "more than flesh...more than blood." Andrew, too, initially sees the ghostly First-as-Warren as "cool": "THE FIRST/WARREN: Pretty bitchin', right? I'm like Obi Wan? ANDREW: Or Patrick Swayze" ("Never," 7008). But it will eventually come to be seen as something of a liability, and even the First Evil itself shocks Caleb by longing for incarnation:

THE FIRST/BUFFY: I envy them. Isn't that the strangest thing?

CALEB: Well, it does throw me a tad. I mean, they're just... well, they're barely more than animals, feedin' off each other's flesh. It's nauseatin'. But you...you're everywhere. You're in the hearts of little children, you're in the souls of the rich, you're the fire that makes people kill and hate. The fire that will cure the world of weakness. They're just sinners. You are sin.

THE FIRST/BUFFY: I do enjoy your sermons.

CALEB: And you're in me. Gave me strength no man can have.

THE FIRST/BUFFY: You're the only man strong enough to be my vessel. And I know you feel me but... I know why they grab at each other. To feel. I want to feel. I want to wrap my hands around an innocent neck and feel it crack.

CALEB: Amen. ("Touched")

Though it would be going too far to identify the First Evil with traditional portrayals of Satan, it is interesting that its contempt for flesh and blood—or at least, Caleb's contempt—parallels that of Milton's Satan:

O Hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold,
Into our room of bliss thus high advanc't
Creatures of other mould, earth-born perhaps,
Not Spirits, yet to heav'nly Spirits bright
Little inferior; whom my thoughts pursue
With wonder, and could love, so lively shines
In them Divine resemblance, and such grace
The hand that form'd them on their shape hath pour'd. (IV.357-65)

[31] It is possible to speculate that some negative reactions to the First as seasonal villain may be akin to those who termed the Evil Troika of geeks in season six as "lame" (kdS)—the First Evil is just too close to home for most viewers. Who wants to be reminded every week, as Joyce tells the dreaming Buffy, "[E]vil is a part of us. All of us" ("Bring," 7010)? Most would rather see Buffy heroically kick-boxing monsters than struggling with the real doubts and fears the monsters metaphorically represent. Similarly, Spike, previously one of the most magnetic of villains, is not at his most fascinating during the early episodes of the season, perhaps because the writers are attempting to deal with the ramifications of his soul in more or less "real" time, whereas Angel's 100 years of agony could be touched on in brief flashbacks. Again, Simone Weil's comment on "literature and morality": "Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring." To the extent that the "First Evil" approached "reality," it was a boring villain. That does not mean, however, that it wasn't evil; nor was it eliminated—though perhaps it was "scrunched" ("Chosen," 7022), but there is no closure on Evil, if I may disagree with David Lavery's assessment of "Chosen" as "closure (at the level of expectations) of the war with The First." Xander's seemingly facetious comment Sunnydale's buried mall metaphorically connects us for the last time to the recurring feature of the First's operating system—lies and half-truth. All the stores—"the Gap, Starbucks, Toys 'R' Us" ("Chosen," 7022)—are chains, branches of which can be found in malls in nearly every major city in America, and in some countries around the world; like the First Evil, "Madison Avenue"—a faceless force trying to sell things with exaggerations and half-truths—is everywhere. The First's biggest lie, of course, is its version of itself as told by the Master at the end of "Lessons," a version of its self-description in "Amends"—"...right back to the beginning. Not the Bang...not the Word...the true beginning" (7001)—because the beginning, of course, is not the First, as it seems to imply, but the creator of the First—in this case, the writer. Say what we like about "reader response" and "deconstruction of the text," without Joss Whedon (and the other Mutant Enemy writers), there is no Buffyverse.

[32] So, it is all connected, but especially "Lessons" is connected to "Chosen," both written and directed by Joss Whedon. David Lavery, in his essay on *Buffy's* endings, citing Frank Kermode, argues that "those fictions which continue to interest us, which through their very subject matter and form give to us a 'sense of an ending' and facilitate our imaginative deconstruction and construction of our world, include *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a fiction which will 'continue to interest us' because it 'move[d] through time to an end, an end which we must sense even if we cannot know it.'" "Lessons" is clearly the beginning of that ending, though the details of the entire season could not have all been in place when "Lessons" was written, and some elements of casting or plotting certainly seem to have changed or developed as the season's filming progressed. However, season seven maintains remarkable coherence in its major elements—if one is watching and listening for these. "Lessons" tells the viewer what to watch and listen for, and even hints at when to

"duck." Season seven as a whole, with its constant referrals "back to the beginning"—which includes any pivotal episodes from previous seasons—keeps reminding viewers where the characters have come from, while at the same time the developing plot pushes the characters toward the final steps they must take to move out of Sunnydale into the world beyond.

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[1] UPN executives and Whedon apparently entertained the possibility of a "Vampire Slayer" series "without Gellar and Buffy at its center" as early as July of 2002 (Bianculli), and perhaps for some time afterward, but this concept seems to have evaporated, at least in the near-term, for a variety of reasons.

[2] For one defense of season six, see my "Yeats's Entropic Gyre and Season 6 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," forthcoming in Thomson, et al., *Blood, Text and Fears: Reading Around Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

[3] E.g., the rumored appearance of the First Evil as Tara in "Conversations with Dead People" (7007) (Whedon, Interview, "The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator").

[4] Last seen in "Who Are You?" (4016).

[5] Last seen in "Pangs" (4008).

[6] In post-season interviews, Mutant Enemy writers stated flatly that Joyce's appearance to Dawn in "Conversations with Dead People" (7007) was, like Cassie's appearance to Willow, a manifestation of the First (e.g., Jane Espenson). It's difficult to argue with clearly announced authorial intent, although I believe a case can be made that Joyce who appears to Dawn is really Joyce, despite the cryptic and possibly divisive nature of her statements: "Things are coming, Dawn. Listen, things are on their way. I love you, and I love Buffy, but she won't be there for you. [. . .] When it's bad, Buffy won't choose you. She'll be against you" (7007). However, this is not the essay for that case.

[7] Joyce as she appears in Buffy's dreams is almost certainly *not* the First Evil. For one thing, she actually touches Buffy in "Bring on the Night" (7010), though perhaps that could be explained as a property of the dream. More significantly, Joyce in Buffy's dreams behaves differently from apparitions of the First, whose ultimate weapons are self-doubt, fear, anger, pride, envy, and emotional pain. Buffy, who has been forcing herself into a commandant role that is not really her style and stretches the limits of her strength, needs to hear the mother-wisdom within tell her

JOYCE: [. . .] there's some things you can't control. The sun always goes down, the sun always comes up. Are you worried about the sun going down? Because there's some things you can't control. The sun always goes down, the sun always comes up

BUFFY: Everyone's counting on me.

JOYCE: Well, they do that, and I'm sorry, Buffy, but these—these friends of yours put too much pressure on you. They always have.

BUFFY: Something evil is coming.

JOYCE: Buffy, evil isn't coming, it's already here. Evil is always here. Don't you know? It's everywhere.

BUFFY: And I have to stop it.

JOYCE: How are you gonna do that?

BUFFY: I-I don't know yet, but—

JOYCE: Buffy, no matter what your friends expect of you, evil is a part of us. All of us. It's natural. And no one can stop nature, not even— (“Bring on the Night,” 7010)

Buffy does need rest—a good night's sleep will give her the clarity to finally confront Caleb successfully and find and retrieve the mystical Scythe (“Touched,” 7020). The sun, a part of the natural order, is the only thing that instantly destroys the über-vampires; and of course, evil is indeed part of all humans, including Buffy, Spike, and Willow, who must all learn to deal with that fact. No one can stop nature, but there are always some things nature can't explain or predict.

[8] Buffy's compulsion to keep Dawn safe may be a lingering effect of the spell which created Dawn: “MONK: For centuries [the Key] had no form at all. My brethren, its only keepers. Then the abomination found us. We had to hide the Key, gave it form, molded it flesh. . .made it human and sent it to you.[...] We knew the Slayer would protect.[...] You cannot abandon” (“No Place Like Home,” 5005). Buffy seems less aware than the others of the effects of magic spells on her—see “Something Blue” (4009) and “Him” (7006).

[9] These scenes also reveal that Dawn has learned to drive—how, we don't know, but it's another skill that she has acquired off-scene, possibly without seeking Buffy's help or approval, and which gives her independence.

[10] This is the first cell-phone ever to appear on *Buffy*, though they have been used on *Angel* since at least season two (2000-2001) and have been increasingly common in the real world for much longer. Why no mobile phones in Sunnydale? No explanation is ever given. It is a small town, though—most places are within walking distance—so maybe cell-phones are just not needed. Also, Buffy herself has never been much of a techie. And finally, one might speculate that mystical influences related to the hellmouth interfered with reception; but that doesn't appear to be a problem in season seven.

[11] Possible candidates for placing the “Lessons” talisman: Principal Wood, Spike, the Bringers, or Xander (highly unlikely); only the Bringers have any believable motive, and are specifically described by Giles in “Amends” as able to “conjure spirit manifestations and set them on people” (3010), though Spike might do it under FE influence. He at least knows the origin of the “manifest spirits”—but he has always known a lot about occult things, so that doesn't necessarily prove anything.

[12] Interviews suggest that this connection may have been developed later in the season; nevertheless, it works perfectly (Espenson, Succubus Club).

[13] Check out the lyrics of the techno soundtrack playing as the German Proto-Slayer is pursued by Harbingers in “Beneath You” (7002).