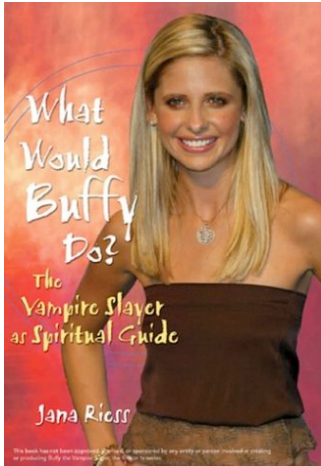




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The Monster Inside: Taming the Darkness Within Ourselves



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"Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
These three alone lead life to sovereign power."
--Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Oenone"

"One may defeat a thousand obstacles and adversaries, yet he who
defeats the enemies within is the noblest victor."
The Buddha

"This thing of darkness I
Acknowledge mine."
Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 5 Scene 1

(1) In "Primeval" (4021), the über-Buffy tells Adam that he could never understand the source of her power. She is partially correct—as we saw in the chapter on friendship, Adam has no concept of the deep power that resides in Buffy's close relationships with her core group of friends. But this isn't the entire story of her strength. In the following episode, the dream montage "Restless" (4022), Buffy dreams that Adam, now in human form, says that although aggression is a natural human tendency, he and Buffy come by their aggression in another way. "We're not demons," Buffy answers flatly. "Is that a fact?" Adam responds. It's a fascinating hint of the seasons to come, which will divulge the other source of Buffy's power: darkness. Ironically, it is the villain Adam who accurately voices Buffy's worst fear: that she, like him, is a hybrid of both human and demon.

(2) *Buffy* has never shied away from exploring themes of darkness and ambiguity. Even the premise of the show—which rests on the delicate balance of power between good and evil, vampires and the Slayer who hunts them—points to the pervasive nature of darkness. One of the series' most compelling messages is that this darkness is not simply an external force to be easily staked, dusted, or otherwise conquered. It is an ongoing inner reality for every person. "Particularly today, the vampire serves as our reflection," argues literary critic William Patrick Day in *Vampire Legends in Contemporary American Culture*. "After all, when one stands next to Dracula and looks in the mirror one sees only oneself." It's an astute observation; on *Buffy*, the vampire serves as a stand-in or a metaphor for some of the darkest impulses and animalistic tendencies of human nature. Particularly in the last three seasons of the show, *Buffy's* focus on evil moves from the monster without to the monster within.

(3) How do we deal with the darkness inside ourselves? What happens when we become our own worst enemies, as the Scoobies do in the deeply *noir* sixth season? How can we acknowledge and respect our own darkness without plunging ourselves into its abyss? In this final section, we've been

exploring how *Buffy* can teach us lessons about saving the world. But unless we acknowledge our ability—and often, our hidden desire—to do harm, we’re unlikely to do much good. We will not save the world unless we know fundamentally that we are saving it not only from external threats but from the monsters inside ourselves.

“How Do You Like My Darkness Now?”: Buffy

(4) “All those years fighting us,” Dracula coaxes Buffy in the fifth-season opener (5001). “Your power so near to our own . . . and you’ve never once wanted to know what it is that we fight for? Never even a taste?” Slitting his arm with a fingernail, Dracula offers his own blood for Buffy to sample, urging her to “find it. The darkness. Find your true nature.” She glimpses that darkness in her own memories, as her mind fills with abrupt images of herself fighting monsters, of the First Slayer, of a vein with blood coursing through it. In this episode Buffy is able to resist the call of the darkness within her, even while she yearns to know more about it. Casting off Dracula’s mesmeric thrall, she stakes him (not once but twice, because she’s watched all of his movies and knows that he always comes back) and pronounces him “eurotrashed.” But the darkness remains, an unsettling presence within the Slayer. It’s interesting to reflect on the old adage that the darkness is always most evident in the hour before dawn: in this episode, that aphorism turns out to be literally true, as Buffy discovers the depths of her own darkness just moments before the character of Dawn appears for the first time.

(5) Dracula’s insinuations, and her intuition about her own darkness, lead Buffy to re-enlist Giles as her Watcher and begin a strenuous program of physical and spiritual training. She wants to know more about the source of her power, and about the other Slayers. Buffy realizes that Dracula actually understood her power better than she does, and she knows she needs a greater self-awareness. Although Buffy began the series as a teenager repulsed by the gore of her life—dead kids falling out of lockers, blood stains constantly on her clothes—she has begun to struggle with an evolving tendency to enjoy her power. Near the end of the third season, for example, she is ready to break the Slayer code by killing Faith, a human, to save Angel, a vampire (3021). Xander tells Buffy that he’s worried about losing her, but it seems that he means “losing” her in a moral sense if she murders Faith. Faith, as many viewers and scholars have pointed out, “represents the darker side of Buffy herself: the power of the Slayer ungoverned by caution and unguided by morality.” It’s a fine line to walk. Buffy’s life is violent by nature, and this reality changes her enough that Spike is not far wrong when he taunts good-boy Riley that Buffy is the type who prefers her men dangerous and dark (“Shadow,” 5008). By that point in the series Buffy is going out patrolling more often—every night, in fact. But she really knows that this “patrolling” is closer to what Dracula calls it: hunting. There is darkness inside of her.

(6) More than two years later, we find out why. When Principal Wood gives Buffy a keepsake belonging to his mother, a former Slayer, Buffy wonders if the box will hold some of the answers she’s been seeking (7015). The box contains shadow-casters, which tell a story when put in motion. First, the story goes, the earth was created, and was populated by demons and men. To fight the demons, the men enslaved a girl by chaining her to the earth. “And then—and I—I can’t read this,” says Dawn, who is translating the ancient document from Sumerian. “Something about darkness.” The shadow-casting mechanism begins to spin of its own accord. “What about darkness?” asks Buffy.

(7) Her curiosity piqued, Buffy enters a portal into another dimension, where three men shackle her wrists and chain her to the ground. Her power, they inform her, descends from the way they created the First Slayer: by mating a girl with the essence of a demon. They offer to do the same for Buffy, increasing her power to equip her to fight the First Evil. In fact, they attempt to force this upon her, telling her that becoming one with the demon is the only way: “This will make you ready for the fight,” says one of the shamans. “By making me less human?” Buffy responds, refusing to cooperate.

(8) Just as she did with Dracula, Buffy resists the allure of acquiring more power through darkness because she rejects its accompanying loss of humanity. Screaming, she insists that this isn’t the way. “You think I came all this way to get knocked up by some demon dust?” she demands. Even if she is not powerful enough to defeat the First Evil—and the apocalyptic vision that one of the shamans gives her just before her return to her own world is enough to convince her that she’s not—she knows that power forged in darkness is too dangerous. Buffy is grateful for the knowledge she’s gained from the Shadow Men and Dracula, whom she admits “opened [her] eyes a little.” But instead of propelling

her on a path toward deeper engagement with evil, this knowledge makes Buffy more wary of her own darkness and more conscious about choosing the light.

“The Wolf Is Inside Me All the Time: Oz

(9) Buffy isn't the only character who has to confront inner darkness. One morning in the second season, Oz awakens to a lovely day and is surrounded by trees and chirping birds (2015). The trouble is that he is naked and has no memory of how he lost his clothes or wound up in the forest. “Huh,” he says in his usual noncommittal tone. It's the beginning of a new phase of life for Oz, and of a struggle between his loving human heart and the beast that seethes just below the surface.

(10) When he learns that a werewolf has ravaged Sunnydale the night before, Oz phones his aunt (in one of the show's all-time most comical scenes) and manages to work a difficult question into their polite conversation: “Aunt Maureen. Hey, it's me. Um, what? Oh! It's, uh... actually it's healing okay. That's pretty much the reason I called. Um, I wanted to ask you something. Is Jordy a werewolf? Uh-huh. And how long has that been going on? Uh-huh. What? No, no reason. Um... Thanks. Yeah, love to Uncle Ken.” Despite his understated approach, Oz knows that the bite he received from his toddler cousin has effectively cursed him for life: he is a werewolf, a condition for which there is no cure.

(11) Giles reveals that a werewolf is “a potent, extreme representation of our inborn animalistic traits” and “acts on pure instinct” with no conscience. When Oz first realizes that he must be the vicious Sunnydale werewolf, his first response is to withdraw from Willow and try to hide his secret from the Scoobies; he is terrified and ashamed. But after Willow discovers his secret, she indicates that she'd still like to have a relationship with him (and concedes that there are several days of the month when she's not exactly pleasant to be around, either). For the next two years, Oz settles into a comfortable routine of allowing himself to be caged three nights a month so that he doesn't hurt anyone. And apart from an isolated episode in which he breaks out of the cage and kills a zombie in “The Zeppo” (3013), the situation seems to work well for everyone.

(12) But Oz has never really come to terms with what it means to be a werewolf, to have an animal raging inside him. In the fourth season, he experiences a mysterious attraction to a woman named Veruca, a fascination that lures him from confinement one night when he is in wolf form (4006). He is bewildered when he once again wakes up in the woods with no memory of what transpired the previous night. Only this time, Veruca is lying next to him, and he comes to discover that she too is a werewolf. Veruca is Oz's character foil; she revels in being a werewolf, regardless of the destruction it causes for others, and she has given herself over fully to her dark side. Oz is both repulsed and enthralled by her, drawn to the darkness, freedom and danger that Veruca represents, but guilty and acutely conscious that he's betrayed Willow. For Oz—taciturn, stoic, gentle Oz—there's an intoxicating liberation in the uncaged life Veruca leads, even though he knows it's wrong and he doesn't want to hurt people. “The animal, it's powerful, inside me all the time,” Veruca coaxes him. “Soon you'll start to feel sorry for everybody else because they don't know what it's like to be as alive as we are. As free.” However, Oz knows that the freedom that Veruca extols comes at the terrible price of the lives of others, and that such callous depravity is unconscionable. At the end of the episode, Oz kills Veruca in werewolf form in order to save Willow's life, but then packs his bags and leaves Sunnydale. “Veruca was right about something,” he tells the brokenhearted Willow. “The wolf is inside me all the time, and I don't know where that line is anymore between me and it. And until I figure out what that means, I shouldn't be around you . . . or anybody.”

(13) Oz's struggles with the wolf inside him are a dramatic representation of the difficulties many people have in controlling unhealthy passions or living inside constraints. Writer and producer Marti Noxon, who wrote “Wild at Heart” (4006), says that the wolf “is the part that both men and women have, that you can destroy relationships even when people love each other.” Oz longs to do what's right, but the darkness inside him—symbolized by the werewolf—demands to be seen. His struggle comes to fruition in “New Moon Rising” (4019), when he returns to Sunnydale and seems to have gained control of his werewolf tendencies. He has gone to Tibet, Romania, and other places to learn meditation and how to keep his “inner cool,” even when there's a full moon. He tells Willow that he's a different person than when he left and can now be what she needs.

(14) But Oz discovers that he can consistently control his wolfish impulses only when Willow is not around, because his love for her calls forth both the best and worst in him. When he learns that she is involved with Tara, Oz transforms once again into a werewolf, his bodily metamorphosis a metaphor for the confusion and jealousy inside of him. Even though it's daylight, his strong negative emotions are enough to make him lose all his hard-won control. At the end of the episode, he leaves Sunnydale, realizing that even if Tara hadn't come into Willow's life, being around Willow makes his wolf surface more readily, and this danger means that they should not be together. For Oz the best way to live with the darkness is to remove himself from what provokes it, even if this is emotionally heartwrenching.

"The Battle's Done, and We Kind of Won": Coping with Ambiguity

(15) Good and evil, Giles tells Buffy, are actually "terribly simple. The good guys are always the stalwart and true; the bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns or black hats. We always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after." Given that the episode in which this dialogue occurs is called "Lie to Me" (2007), we would be right to suspect that Giles is being satirical. "Liar," Buffy responds. They both know it's never that simple.

(16) Just as there is darkness within every person—symbolized by the "demon" in Buffy and the "wolf" inside Oz—*Buffy* assumes a densely nuanced moral universe. Some vampires are good, and some humans are evil; choices are not depicted as being purely and obviously right or wrong, but fraught with complexity; answers are never absolute but conditional and often in flux. Is it any wonder that the close of the musical episode (6007) has Giles qualifying his joy at defeating yet another demon with the line, "the battle's done, and we kind of won"?

(17) One of the most intriguing aspects of this show is that its writers allow their characters to wrestle with such ambiguities and to be monumentally flawed. Buffy can be selfish and sometimes shallow; Willow's insecurities threaten to destroy her and others; Xander's fear of the future cripples his growth into a mature adult, and he winds up breaking Anya's heart. In the *Buffyverse*, as in life, most good people have elements of darkness in them, and some "evil" characters turn out to be good. Or at the very least, they often speak the truth: the Mayor is the first person to make Buffy and Angel think seriously about whether a future together is realistic, and Spike intuitively understands (and exploits) some of the tensions the Scoobies are experiencing in their relationships in the fourth season. In the seventh season, one of the things that makes the First Evil so pernicious is that it's not reliably unreliable. When it appears to several characters on the same night in "Conversations with Dead People" (7007), the First does not *always* lie. There are some truths mixed in with its noxious fictions, and it knew all about special times she had shared with Tara. How can people tell the difference between the First's lies and its truths? Clearly, on *Buffy* villains can actually be more honest than the characters allow themselves to be, so dealing with them is always a tangled and messy enterprise.

(18) Ambiguity is a difficult reality to live with. As we've already seen, the fourth season is a time for Riley to begin to learn to think for himself rather than simply obeying orders from his "superiors." He gainfully attempts to navigate a world that, for him, is newly complicated, because he has long depended on the military to direct, guide, and instruct him. Through his interactions with Buffy and her friends, Riley also comes to understand the more subtle entanglements of the war between good and evil. He has always compartmentalized good and evil the way Professor Walsh and the Initiative taught him: humans are good; demons are bad. But one of Buffy's gang is the vampire Riley knows as "Hostile Number 17" (a.k.a. Spike), who sometimes works with the Scoobies to kill demons; Riley also learns that Buffy once had a vampire as a boyfriend. In "New Moon Rising" (4019), Riley is about to kill a werewolf when he realizes that the monster is actually Willow's ex-boyfriend, Oz. Whereas moments before, he had been poised to kill the werewolf and was utterly sure that it was simply a "thing" and a "killer," now Riley realizes that reality is more complex than he has ever imagined. Knowing that his simple rubric doesn't work anymore, Riley comes to accept Buffy's explanation that "besides the wolf thing, Oz is a great guy." The black-and-white paradigm of "demons bad, people good" no longer serves to explain the realities that Riley's now observing in the world—not the least of which is that Professor Walsh, his trusted human mentor, turned out to be so deadly.

(19) Riley's moral evolution in encountering ambiguity suggests how uncomfortable living with shades of gray can be. Like him, Buffy sometimes wishes that the world were more clear-cut, and that

her decisions would be easier. "I like my evil like I like my men," she complains in "Pangs" (4008). "Evil. Straight up, black hat, tie-you-to-the-train-tracks, soon-my-electro-ray-will-destroy-Metropolis *bad*." She rarely gets it, though, because absolute moral certainty remains distressingly elusive on *Buffy*. In fact, when Buffy returns from the dead in the sixth season, she sings that her heavenly sojourn was characterized by "no fear, no doubt" (6007). In other words, paradise for her was an absence of ambiguity. But in the Buffyverse, such clarity cannot be achieved on earth, where good and evil mingle freely, and determining the most ethical course of action is often difficult.

Living with Our Shadow Selves

(20) Ambiguity finds its most disturbing expression when we poke around inside ourselves, exploring the maze of contradictions within. We are spiritual and carnal, altruistic and selfish, magnanimous and narrow-minded, good and evil. What twentieth-century psychoanalyst Carl Jung called the "shadow self"—our darker double—is always with us. Jung told a relevant story about an upstanding family he once knew: the father, a Quaker, "could not imagine that he had ever done anything wrong in his life," Jung said, and he "would not take on his shadow." The man's denial of his shadow self played out in his children succumbing wholly to darkness, Jung believed; one of them became a thief and the other a prostitute. "Because the father would not take on his shadow, his share in the imperfection of human nature, his children were compelled to live out the dark side which he had ignored," Jung claimed. Although we may not agree with Jung's conclusion that this man's children took on their father's shadow in destructive ways, Jung's overall idea—that denial of our shadow selves is destructive to everyone around us—speaks a very real truth. As Joss Whedon notes in the voice-over commentary on "Wild at Heart" (4006), the most dangerous people are often those who are totally unaware of their dark sides. "Nobody thinks that they're a bad guy," Whedon says. "Nobody thinks that they're not righteous. I've dealt with people that are truly villainous, I mean *villainous* . . . people who have done appalling things to other people on purpose. And they think that they're righteous."

(21) For Jung, and for us as well, the key is a greater self-awareness, with the goal of full identity integration. As Xander discovers in the very funny fifth-season episode "The Replacement" (5003), the human psyche is composed of deeply intricate components that are delicately balanced. When Xander is accidentally hit by a demon's ray gun, it splits his identity so that one Xander seems poised and forceful, but humorless; the other is unkempt and unconfident, but funny. (And he can do the all-important "Snoopy dance.") They are two sides of the same coin—represented by the shiny nickel that the suave Xander keeps twirling in his fingers throughout the episode. Neither can exist without the other, and both come to realize that they are integral halves of the same whole. When the two are magically re-integrated at the end of the episode, Xander knows that he has both aspects inside him and can draw upon them both. The next day, he and the Scoobies move his things to the lovely new apartment that the forceful, confident Xander rented. His integrated identity is the principal factor in his long-deserved exodus from his parents' basement and his increased ability to move forward with his life.

(22) Xander's example suggests the importance of integrating the many conflicting aspects of what we call the self. But what about integrating darkness into our personalities? On *Buffy* it's not just the "monster" characters who need to learn to tame their own darkness; all of the principals routinely grapple with their dark sides. Giles, for example, hardly seems the type to have an inner ogre, but in the second season we learn that in his youth, he had a renegade and troublesome life as "Ripper" (2008). Giles spends much of his adult life trying to forget his Ripper period, or at least to stem the tide of the damage he did then. But we see a shade of Ripper in Giles now and again, such as when he uses his demon status in "A New Man" (4012) to terrorize Professor Walsh, who ridiculed and sneered at him once before. The Ripper part of him takes a certain perverse pleasure in seeing Professor Walsh run for her life. But "Ripper" is also an aspect of Giles that he can enlist in his fight for good, so Giles sometimes employs his dark side to stanch the power of evil. In "The Gift" (5022), for example, Buffy has the chance to kill Ben, ending Glory's reign of power once and for all, but she cannot do so because Ben is a human being. Although the Slayer cannot end Ben's life, Giles remarks that he is bound by no such heroic code, and calmly smothers Ben. Ironically, it's because Giles can tap into his darkness that he is able to do some good, defeating Glory forever. It's a morally ambiguous act—like many such acts on *Buffy*—but a necessary one.

(23) Willow is another character who struggles with the darkness within her but learns to control it. In the alternate realities of the third-season episodes "The Wish" (3009) and "Doppelgängerland" (3016), we get a glimpse of Willow as her alter ego: still clever and "kinda gay," as she puts it, but also purely evil and without conscience. When we see her evil side come to fruition late in the sixth season (6020-22), it's almost as if the prophecy of these episodes has been fulfilled: Willow becomes her evil twin down to the last detail. Even the words that she utters before killing Warren—"Bored now"—echo those spoken by her villainous