

BUFFY AT PLAY: TRICKSTERS, DECONSTRUCTION,
AND CHAOS AT WORK IN THE WHEDONVERSE

by

Brita Marie Graham

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts

in

English

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSTIY
Bozeman, Montana

April 2007

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Dr. Linda Karell, Committee Chair

Approved for the Department of English

Dr. Linda Karell, Department Head

Approved for the Division of Graduate Education

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Brita Marie Graham

April 2007

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In gratitude, I wish to acknowledge all of the exceptional faculty members of Montana State University's English Department, who encouraged me along the way and promoted my desire to pursue a graduate degree. Especially, I'm thankful to Dr. Linda Karell, for her tireless efforts to help me share the appeal of and fascination with *Buffy* that we share; to Dr. Michael Sexson, for reawakening the joy of my love affair with mythology; to Dr. Gwendolyn Morgan, for meticulously steering me through the curves of the literary vampire labyrinth; and to Dr. Robert Bennett, for patiently showing me the interesting ways that pop culture and literary theory connect.

I must also acknowledge with appreciation the support of my family, especially my parents, Colleen and Owen Asplund, who nurtured in me a life-long love of learning and language. To my husband, who endured many late nights and long talks about my subject matter, as well as an endless amount of viewing certain episodes of *Buffy*, many thanks. And for my children, who are the *sine qui non* of all my endeavors, thank you for always being my silver lining.

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ABSTRACT

The television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – in its entirety – encompasses a collection of ideas, languages, semiotic representation, artistic expression, and even scientific curiosity that is not easily reducible and has few true parallels. The Whedonverse, as fans refer to it, has become a semiotic domain in much the same vein as *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*, reaching beyond its one-time niche market into the realm of pop culture iconography. The text's simultaneous admixture and denial of discrete genres, from comedy to action, from horror to melodrama, marks it as a truly unique creation. While textual vampires have always been important barometers of our society, we need an understanding not only of vampires, but of the trickster construct to more fully understand how *Buffy* works – and plays – and in what ways the myths and symbols of pre-colonial storytelling tie in to post-modernism, deconstruction, and even contemporary scientific inquiry, such as chaos theory.

Buffy has the potential not only to play a mediating role between scientific and humanistic theoretical practices, as well as between older and more contemporary varieties of literary criticism, but it demands a confrontation with elitism. Contemporary examination of the modes of traditional scholarship, for some time now, has been proposing the breakdown of hierarchies between the humanities and science, between so-called “high” and “low” culture. This is work for a trickster, the work of the rebel, and *Buffy* rises to the challenge. Because *Buffy* does not try to encompass all meaning, but rather to question it and its attendant authority, it becomes that much more meaningful still, and moments of meaning coalesce within it. Any text that has the scope and capacity to incorporate such diverse elements should garner respect and praise, and yet – for all its potential pomp and genuinely thoughtful commentaries – *Buffy* never aspires to be truly serious. Through humor and bricolage, it becomes a meta-vampire/trickster text.

INTRODUCTION

Vampires are a paradox. Demon in a human body. You walk in both worlds, yet belong to neither. [...] You fear death. Being immortal, you fear it more than those to whom it comes naturally. (“Who Are You?” 4:16)

This observation about vampires is made by Adam, a character from Season Four of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Part human, part demon and part cyborg, he is a Frankensteinian creation of the corrupt Psychology professor Dr. Maggie Walsh, who heads a secret military project dubbed “The Initiative.” The Initiative’s aims are ostensibly to capture and study “hostile sub-terrestrials” (HST’s) such as vampires, demons and other creatures generally perceived as being evil. Dr. Walsh’s secret Adam sub-project is an endeavor to create the ultimate soldier, a perfect fighting machine. Adam’s awakening and his possession of a self-awareness of his own agenda -- which is to understand “how [things] work” by means of dissection after murdering various beings – is just one more layer of complexity manifest in this particular story arc (“Goodbye Iowa” 4.14).

From this example alone, rife with literary cues (Adam, Frankenstein, Freud), metaphorical implications, and cultural commentary, we can see how the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is about multifaceted ethical dilemmas, and not just vampires or girls with innocent-sounding names. Yet the vampires he speaks of have a rich and intricate role in both literary history and socio/political interpretation, while the name “Buffy” begs analysis from its class associations with rich heiresses, Preppies and Valley Girls. Still, the show *Buffy* – in its entirety – encompasses a collection of ideas, languages,

semiotic representation, artistic expression, and even scientific curiosity that is not easily reducible and has few true parallels.

When Joss Whedon first developed his idea about *Buffy*, his goal was to create “a show that a hundred people need to see [rather] than a thousand people like to see [...] I want Buffy to live in people's imagination" (Biography par. 1). To that end, with the help of a number of other creative minds, Whedon created a universe of considerable complexity and depth. The Whedonverse, as fans refer to it, has become a semiotic domain in much the same vein as *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*, reaching beyond its one-time niche market into the realm of pop culture iconography. A Google search, one of the best indicators of cultural capital, will return 1, 990,000 hits for the title *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, despite the fact that the show was cancelled four years ago.¹

This continuing phenomenon of popularity may be in part because *Buffy*'s reality is distinct in its mingling of science fiction with mythic elements, as well as a strident determination to keep at least one foot firmly planted in the mundane. The text's simultaneous fusion and denial of other discrete genres, from comedy to action, from horror to melodrama, marks it as a truly unique creation. For this reason also, *Buffy* has proven itself worthy of literary analysis, but the reasons – like the show itself – are intricate and varied. Intricacy and variation bring to mind several analytical possibilities, including deconstruction, post-modernism, myth and symbols, and complexity theory. Each avenue of inquiry poses questions about how to assess meaning, or whether or not

¹ Google Scholar returns 988 hits.

that is even possible in the world in which we live. Craig Simpson, a scholar who studies telemyths, explains:

For ancient people with a dearth of information, myths explained what humans didn't understand. For modern people with a surfeit of information, much of it conflicting and confusing, [telemyths], at their best, probe a deeper reality, the moral ambiguities and moments of truth that illuminate our experiences as they did our ancestors'. One culture's oral tradition is another's boob tube. (2)

How does the telemyth *Buffy*, via the aforementioned avenues, create possibilities for understanding the inexplicable and why is humor and the play of language so central to this? The answers may prove to be a commentary not only on the polysemic nature of the text, but also on the age in which we live. After all, textual vampires have always been important barometers of our society. Ancient mythologies, prevailing third world multi-cultural narratives, and their pop-culture pretenders are all pivotal to an understanding of the academic and political climate of today. Yet we need an understanding not only of vampires, but of the trickster construct to more fully understand how *Buffy* works – and plays – and in what ways the myths and symbols of pre-colonial storytelling tie in to post-modernism, deconstruction, and even contemporary scientific inquiry. Tricksters and their accompanying traits may be one way to account for how the science of complexity theory relates to art and culture.

The term “trickster” evokes many important concepts, from anthropology to psychology, from classical mythology to contemporary multi-cultural studies. It is an expansive concept that alludes to both the need for disruptive influence and the necessity of finding cyclic connections. What better way can we simultaneously mingle the sacred

and the profane, the past and the present, the crass and the transcendent and still talk about art and science? My assertion is that *Buffy*, as I refer to not only the text of the show but also to its performance and all that has arisen from it, acts like a trickster entity. In so doing, it accomplishes teaching moments, questions stability and authority, and disperses the light of understanding into an opalescent multiplicity of possibilities and meaningfulness. So with the trickster firmly in mind, come and we'll take a journey, while we explore "a little story I like to call 'Buffy, a slayer of the *Vampyrs*'" ("Storyteller" 7.16). And if we are really lucky, perhaps we'll encounter an apocalypse or two along the way.

“IT’S BLOOD; IT’S WHAT I DO.”

THE ELUSIVE VAMPIRE TRICKSTER CONSTRUCT

This world is older than any of you know. Contrary to popular mythology, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons demons walked the Earth. They made it their home, their... their Hell. But in time they lost their purchase on this reality. The way was made for mortal animals, for man. All that remains of the Old Ones are vestiges, certain magicks, certain creatures. (“The Harvest” 1.2)

In this manner, Giles, Buffy’s British watcher and ostensible father-figure, explains to her and her friends the way that vampires came to be in their reality. His is a very different take on what we have come to expect from vampires through the years and it is clear from the start that *Buffy*’s vampires are more complicated than their forebears. Still, to have a British man spell out the parameters of vampirism seems fitting, since for most of us, vampires begin with *Dracula*. *Buffy* first appeared on the small screen in 1997, one hundred years after the publication of Bram Stoker’s most notorious work in 1897 and the significance of these two texts bracketing the twentieth century will not be lost on scholars of any kind in terms of what this time period, both at its advent and its closing, represent in terms of reductive and repressive influence.

Great Britain and America were, at these moments, experiencing the vertiginous headiness that comes with the realization that they were (respectively) the world’s most powerful nations; more importantly, however, these momentous events came with the awareness of the precariousness of such a situation. Precarious situations are breeding grounds for fear, even paranoia. This paranoia manifests itself in Britain as tightly controlled Victorian sexual sensibilities, an obsession with propriety and manners, a

passionate adherence to Christianity and a deep and abiding fear of all foreign influence. Stoker expresses this fear most evidently in Van Helsing's crusade-like invocation of righteous indignation against the Count:

Thus are we ministers of God's own wish: that the world and men for whom His Son die, will not be given over to monsters, whose very existence would defame him. He have allowed us to redeem one soul already and we go out as the old knights of the Cross to redeem more. Like them we shall travel towards the sunrise; and like them, if we fall, we fall in good cause. (Stoker 341)

For the late Victorians, this "crusade" was clearly a matter of great seriousness, which has an all-too-familiar echo in our day.

Dracula Dawning

For those less familiar with the actual text of Stoker's *Dracula*, which has gone through many permutations over the years, I will highlight its distinguishing characteristics, as well as the vampiric traditions which both preceded and succeeded it. Giles himself would give no less in the way of backstory. We start with young British lawyer Jonathan Harker, who has just become engaged to the winsome Wilhelmina (Mina) Slater. The story commences with his journal of a trip abroad to aid a decrepit Carpathian nobleman in his legal affairs. This journey is marked by curious encounters with the strange customs of the Eastern European peasantry and is capped off by his being held prisoner by the mysterious Count himself, who, he learns, comes from a fearsome line of ambitious, conquering tyrants. The Count turns out to be something other than human, but Jonathan never exactly figures out what while he's there. Despite

a number of otherworldly experiences in the Count's castle (including being nearly seduced – or possibly eaten -- by three alarmingly sensuous women, Jonathan manages to escape and returns to England (Stoker).

Meanwhile, we are introduced to Mina, a budding young stenographer who plans on being the perfect wife and her sweet, innocent friend Lucy, who is so endearing as to have accumulated three tongue-wagging suitors. Among these suitors is the young Dr. John Seward, who runs a sanitarium and takes “notes” about his patients (including the peculiar bug-eating Renfield) on a phonograph.² By their account, the Count follows Jonathan back to England for unspecified reasons,³ then turns Lucy into a child-eating vampire and attempts to do the same to Mina. Despite the fact that Dr. Seward calls in his old mentor, Dr. Abraham Van Helsing – the original vampire slayer, an expert in both science and folklore – the men are at a loss. Many blood transfusions follow, from all three above-mentioned men, as well as Lucy's fiancé, the wealthy Arthur, Lord Godalming and his American friend Quincy, Lucy's other suitors. But they must ultimately stake Lucy through the heart, put garlic flowers in her mouth and cut off her head (Stoker).

Despite Jonathan's legal wizardry and Arthur's throwing a lot of money around, the Count manages to acquire a property near the sanitarium and has psychically enslaved Renfield. Meanwhile, Mina becomes sicker and the men decide they must drive out the Count and eventually run him to ground back in his homeland, just before Mina becomes

² Dr. Seward's recordings and Mina's transcription comprise the better portion of the remainder of the book.

³ The possibilities are to wreak vengeance on his former guest, to colonize the west, to seduce the women and to spread the curse of vampirism, to name just a few.

fully vampiric. Although Jonathan's hair turns white at some point, in the end, it is his legal finagling, Arthur's means, Quincy's heroism and both doctors' intelligence that have won the day – and possibly Christianity (Stoker).

The Eastern influence of the mysterious Count obviously posed a threat to the stability of the Empire in the eyes of the protagonists. Yet, what is perhaps most interesting about *Dracula* is the way in which Van Helsing's cache of multi-cultural information reflects not only fear but fascination with the Otherness of both vampires and foreigners. This fascination is an indicator of an increased impatience with the stasis the paranoia is protecting. The text ends up being a porous medium through which bleeds the next century's forays into more open sexuality, post-colonial independence, mysticism and a fascination with folklore and so-called "primitive" culture that would persist even until *Buffy* came along and beyond.

Stoker's depictions of Mina's and Lucy's virginal, idealized womanhood at home (the heart of the Empire) contrast starkly with Jonathan Harker's Carpathian adventures, particularly his encounters with the Three Sisters. The implication is that, deep down, this flirtation with the dangerous and forbidden is what British men really want, in spite of themselves. Still, while Mina's forays into stenography and Dr. Seward's phonograph sessions seem to represent a forward-looking mindset, the bulk of the story reflects a deep ambivalence about moving away from the familiar, an ambivalence also manifest in *Buffy*. The communal fear of the Count's eventual incursions into Britain and the failure of Arthur "Lord Godalming's" huge piles of money to keep him at bay, represent an intractable stubbornness in the face of change and a failure to admit to the imperfection

of the status quo. Even Van Helsing's knowledge of all things foreign is not enough to protect his friends, but then his ridiculous accent makes him a bit suspicious. After all, he is foreign too.

The fact of Dracula's ties to the past, to folklore and fairy-tales, mysticism and magic, flies in the face of the confidence in the hegemony of reason and science over superstition and tradition which marked the late Victorian period and which are even more pronounced today. Efforts to suppress all vestiges of such "chicanery and balderdash" (as Giles would call it) become evident in the telling of Dracula's tale ("Tabula Rasa" 6.8). But when we look more closely, the tale itself looks like an attempt to quantify and abridge a number of vampiric traditions into one easy-to-manipulate whole that could be incorporated into the dominant narrative of British supremacy. We will see how *Buffy* makes light of both the British and American versions of this.

Vampire Collectors

Since Stoker's day, perhaps inspired by him, numerous scholars have tried to collect and reduce the trappings of early vampire traditions in their entirety. Montague Summers' *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin* and Dudley Wright's *Vampires and Vampirism: Legends from Around the World*, were both products of the early twentieth century which have endured the decades. In the 1970s, Radu Florescu and Raymond McNally co-wrote *In Search of Dracula: A True History of Dracula and Vampire Legends*, attempting to create a legitimate socio/scientific reality for both the Count of legend and the myth of the creature. Most currently, J. Gordon Melton compiled *The*

Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead, which included not only tidbits from the aforementioned experts, but his own collected observations and research, including the phenomena of vampirism in both pop culture and sociological settings.

Each has met with limited success, due to the incredible scope of the enterprise.⁴ Patrick Day, author of *Vampire Legends: What Becomes a Legend Most*, speculates that trying to create a “hard and fast monomyth” is problematic (11). Nina Auerbach, in *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, asserts that every culture has its own kind of vampire, as does every age (89). From demon/spirits like the Lamia of Greece and the bat-like *Camazotz* of Mayan mythology, to the fairy-related *dearg dul* of Ireland and the cat people in the Orient, numerous mythical entities correlate with the tradition of the vampire and the human fascination with blood, death, sex and perceptions of evil (Melton 304, 458, 370, 382). Yet this is still oversimplification at its best. As Day explains, “The vampire is not a monolithic archetype,” and Auerbach further states that “There is no such creature as ‘The Vampire’; there are only vampires” (Day 11, Auerbach 5).

Nevertheless, as Day proposes, “The process of creating meaning in the present is in part imagining links to the past” because reconstruction of previous vampire lore “enables us to see our vampires more clearly” (12). This was as true in Stoker’s day as it is in ours. The fact that vampires have a “folkloric existence outside [...] fiction” lends their stories an “air of authenticity,” according to Day (13). Stoker’s *Dracula* has

⁴ Melton acknowledges the enormity of the task, stating that “the literature is vast” and, for purposes of his research, included not only his own collection of over 500 titles of novels and short stories, as well as a number of comic books and graphic novels, but also many resources from the Davidson Library at the University of California at Santa Barbara, more recent books and ethnic folklore, fan communities and publishers, to name just a few (xxii). Melton also attributes many of the errors in current perceptions of vampires to Summers and Wright, since their works were considered to be seminal for decades (xxi).

undeniably played a pivotal role in endeavoring to capture that folklore and inject it into storytelling throughout the twentieth century, especially on film. Yet to limit the vampire's origins to nineteenth-century British literature is to limit both the vampire's contemporary and future incarnations; neither can be done, in part because vampires are not easily reducible. "Vampires are easy to stereotype," Auerbach tells us, "but it is their variety which makes them survivors" (1).

Folkloric Vampires

I will not attempt to summarize all vampire mythology, when there are already so many resources which do just that. Still, I must necessarily point out some relevant highlights in order to accentuate the means by which vampire tales have long since been about disruption and the inexplicable. To begin with, many of the earliest vampiric traditions relate to some sort of devil, evil spirit, or demonic possession, a concept which persists in *Buffy*. Lilith, Adam's first wife in mystical Judaic tradition, plays a role in such associations and Summers credits her with being the mother of incubi and succubi, after she had congress with "the Beast." According to his sources, the Hebrew name "Lilith" was probably derived from the Babylonian demon, Lilitu, a night spirit associated with "nightly emissions." Early Jewish prohibitions concerning sexuality brought about the idea of succubi – female demons – trying to literally "suck the life" out of young men in their sleep and it was only a small leap to lay the blame at the feet of Lilith (Summers Abr. Ch. 4).

An incubus, in contrast, was believed to “[invade] a woman’s bedroom at night, lying on top of her so that its weight was quite evident on her chest and forcing her to have sex” (Melton 318). Melton cites Thomas Aquinas’ belief that incubi/succubi were able to alter their sex to suit the demands of the moment; that is, they could “change form and appear as a succubus for a man and an incubus for a woman” (Melton 319).⁵ In either case, the violent, rape-like connotations of these attacks, in combination with strict social mores surrounding human sexuality well before Victorian England, indicated that such “visitations” must be purely evil, a construction that *Buffy* will question.

By contrast, Jan Perkowski – another vampire expert mentioned by Melton -- marks a clear distinction between what he identifies as a vampire “(an enlivened corpse) and the *mora*, (a spherical shaped spirit)” whose name in Scandinavian (*mara*) and Old Teutonic (*mare*) is the source of the term *nightmare* (Melton 320). Auerbach informs us, however, that such an admixture of vampiric forms is not uncommon. According to her research, “[Most] folklorists use *vampire* interchangeably with *revenant* or *ghost*” (20). The necessity of distinctions becomes questionable when we are investigating an entity which itself blurs the line between life and death. In the Whedonverse, the lines between these entities are more clearly drawn, but the uncertainty of death’s finality remains.

This uncertainty evokes images of enlivened corpses and accordingly the zombie is another creature whose origins have a great deal of crossover into the vampire mythos. After all, we call them both “undead.” The variety of vampirism known as “necrophagy,” a sort of ritual cannibalism, was often associated not only with zombies

⁵ This idea of sexual changeability will come into play in later discussion.

but with the evil sabbat of witches and their ilk. Vampires were often thought to have been witches in life and were thus “connected to the practice of black magic” by this commonality (Summers Abr. Ch. 2). Additionally, the sacredness of burial practices was so extensively complicated that disruption of it might be “brought about by well-nigh any curse” (Summers Abr. Ch.2). As arbiters of cursing, witches were once again implicated in the creation of the vampire, or the zombie, as the case might be. Yet again, both witches and zombies are distinctly different from vampires in *Buffy*’s world.

Much of the confusion had to do with the occurrence of “people dying from lingering disease” such as tuberculosis, cancer, the bubonic plague, anemia, cholera, rabies and other illnesses whose pathology was little understood throughout much of history (Melton 210). Often, when corpses were disinterred, a variety of peculiar conditions were observed which seemed to indicate continuing life: “ruddy complexion [...] the hair and fingernails had continued to grow [...] blood was present around the mouth and in the body when it was cut or punctured” (Melton 21). For people who were already struggling with the significance of death, this must have been disturbing and continued to be so for the teens and adults of Sunnydale, *Buffy*’s locale.

Whether this failure to decay was attributed to the corpse becoming a zombie or becoming a vampire depended a great deal upon the culture and the perceptions of the dead person’s inherent evilness, as opposed to the belief that someone else would do evil to them. The *vrykolakas*, a Greek vampire, is thought to have been “the body of a man of wicked and debauched life, very often one who was excommunicated by his bishop.” Those who committed suicide, or died under any sudden or suspicious circumstances

were also “regarded with the gravest suspicion” (Summers Ch. 1). Often, the bodies in these situations underwent extensive ritual and physical dismemberment to diminish the chances of the dead returning to prey upon family and friends. In the Buffyverse, vampires are – for the most part – innocent victims who merely turn to dust when staked.

In contrast, necrophagy also “enters largely into the passions of the werewolf,” and hence wolves, cats, bats and other creatures known for devouring humans or sampling their blood became associated with the myth of vampires, although again they are distinct in Buffy’s experience (Summers Ch. 1). The *ch’ing shih*, a vampire of Chinese origin, often took the form of a large cat, especially when being pursued and when incorporeal, like the *mora*, was a “glowing sphere of light” (“Universal Vampire”). The *bhuta*, a half-man, half-bat creature which hailed from India, had connections to Kali, the Hindu goddess of death, an archetype for witches if ever there was one (Melton 362-3). Furthermore, the associations of witches and their familiars played a significant role in the accumulative coherence of the wicked traditions amongst witches, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, zombies, demons and evil spirits, which we will see each have unique identities in the Whedonverse. As often as not, they are friendly.

Clearly, the amalgamation of even these few entities into a single entity known as “The Vampire” represents a Herculean task, as undertaken by Stoker and his successors. To capitalize on all these fears and not drift towards the ridiculous was even more daunting. But Stoker and the scholars who followed him had still more to contend with, for they were also preceded by the Romantics and all their effervescent enthusiasm for the beauty of the mystical.

Romantic Vampires

There are few who would dispute that *Dracula* is grounded in one of the most honored of canonical traditions: romanticism. If Lord Byron had not, himself, depicted vampires in his poem “The Giaour” (1813) and his later vampire “Fragment” (1816), then the associations between him and vampires would have been lionized nonetheless by Polidori’s portrayal of the Byronic Lord Ruthven in “The Vampyre” (1819). Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Christabel* (1816) and later, Sheridan LeFanu’s *Carmilla* (1872), further legitimize the sub-genre of the romantic/gothic vampire.

Auerbach tells us that these earlier literary vampires were not enemies, but rather “singular friends” (13). For example, Byron’s mysterious yet gentlemanly Darvell and Polidori’s Lord Ruthven in *The Vampyre* – which is based on Byron’s behavior during their stay with the Shelleys in the Villa Diodati in Geneva – were simultaneously familiar and enigmatic associates of the narrators of the stories. Both authors “wrote not about masters and servants, but about friends” (Auerbach 15). Their very familiarity is what draws in the reader and exploits the fascination we have with both the mysterious and the uncanny.⁶ As I will show, this trait is also manifest amongst *Buffy*’s vampires.

⁶ Uncanniness in the Freudian sense is more truly exploited in Byron’s earlier work *The Giaour*, in which “a patriarchal, incestuous spirit [...] eats his dependent women” (Auerbach 17). Still, the very explicit nature of the betrayal of relationships based on trust is intrinsic to understanding vampires during this and later time periods.

But first, we must consider that Auerbach points out how Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* also involves "vampire-like variations on living death" (19). Coleridge goes even farther in comparing marriage in particular to undeath in *Christabel*, a poem about the serpent-woman Geraldine, a "best friend who offers dangerous sympathy [to the motherless Christabel]" (47-8). Like the later novel *Carmilla*, by Sheridan Le Fanu, the friendship of these two women begins a different kind of crossover in matters of intimacy, specifically homosexuality. There is also an increasing sensibility that good and evil are not what they seem. With both *Christabel* and *Carmilla*, "vampire and victim are so entwined that [...] the story has no logical end, for no character can be saved or damned" (50).

The idea of vampires as lovers is also intricately explored in *Carmilla* for the first time. Le Fanu's Laura finds in the mysterious woman her "only available source of intimacy" (Auerbach 38). In exploring sexuality with Laura, *Carmilla* becomes "one of the few self-accepting homosexuals in Victorian or any literature" (41). Moreover, Le Fanu's dream sequences allow the women in *Carmilla* to "merge into a union the men who watch them never see" (43). Once again, the vampire mythos manages to do two things at once, both revealing and obscuring a would-be forbidden liaison. Unfortunately, "Carmilla's ritual decapitation [at the end] is an abstract anticlimax to the vividness of her seduction" (46). Auerbach witnesses that, as a result of this disavowal of *Carmilla's* and Laura's love, "for generations after Le Fanu, erotic friendship with vampires became unthinkable" (47). *Buffy* adeptly addresses this problem, as I will also demonstrate later.

Yet for all the mystery, longing and eroticism romantic vampires evoked, they were still serious creatures. While Van Helsing was beset by Dracula's capacity to seduce the women, Stoker made clear that the Count's real threat was against the Empire, as much as – if not more than – the virtue of the virginal.

Cinematic Vampires

Still manifesting their variability, we can see that vampires “adapt differently to each narrative form” by observing their crossover into motion pictures (Auerbach 8). The first vampire movie, directed by F.W. Murnau in Germany in 1922, was *Nosferatu*. The film features the creepy Count Orlock, a not-very-well-disguised version of Dracula who, in true vampiric fashion, broaches various and sundry copyright laws. The Count is played by the peculiar method actor Max Schreck, whose last name actually translates as *fear*. When we watch Schreck, “his movements are ostentatiously unnatural,” even ghost-like (Auerbach 73). Auerbach notes that “his ghostliness makes him as fragile as he is agile” (74). Rat like, with his long nails and teeth, Count Orlock can scarcely be construed as having human needs or motives. Bremen is “infected,” not London and the losses of World War I are not difficult to glean in such an interpretation. Like the evil of war, “*Nosferatu* unleashes mass death, not individual sexuality” (74).

It took nine years for the undead on film to cross the Atlantic. Ever adaptable, American film vampires showed that they could “shape themselves to personal and national moods” (Auerbach 5). Tod Browning's American *Dracula* (1931) stars Bela Lugosi, a genuine Transylvanian import. With no fangs or long fingernails, Lugosi's

Dracula is a snappy dresser and as smooth as Rudolph Valentino. The characters of Jonathan and Renfield are merged into one rather clueless protagonist, an arrogant Westerner who, as in Murnau's version, gives no heed to local superstition. In Browning's film, "The corrupt traveler, not the vampire, is the movie's authentic alien" (Auerbach76).

Draped in the black cape which would later become Dracula's trademark, Lugosi is the embodiment of the continental gentleman, almost reminiscent of Lord Ruthven. The degree to which he is sinister is markedly diminished by his smooth manner and his subtle wit. "I never drink - *vine*," he tells his unsuspecting guest when offered a glass of burgundy. This is not the wicked conqueror embodied in the pages of Stoker's book. As Auerbach points out, "Stoker's growling Count was no ironist" (77). Lugosi's Count is not only ironic, but also street savvy and perhaps even world-weary.

Lugosi dominated the Dracula film persona throughout much of the coming decades. Not until Christopher Lee came on the scene in the 1950s was there a more widely recognized rendition of the Count. In 1958, with the burgeoning and decline of McCarthyism, *The Horror of Dracula* again gave us a vampire who was more scary than sexy. With sharp teeth and blood-stained lips, Lee's Dracula threatened a world in which Lucy and Mina are sisters and vengeance against Jonathan Harker must be carried out through their victimization ("Official Hammer"). Post World War II sensibilities about both the woman's role in the home and threats to peace and tranquility from Eastern influences are once again apparent in this rendition of horrific vampirism.

Moreover, Western paranoia about both nuclear destructivity and the perils of communism needed an outlet of the fantastic variety, a safer place to explore scary concepts of death and destruction. The meeting of gothic melodrama and “Eastmancolor (processed by Technicolor)” caught the imagination of the world, not just America, giving Hammer Studios – the British company which produced Lee’s films – the reputation it maintains to this day as a “premiere horror-film producer” (“Official Hammer”).

Probably as a result of the Cold War, Hollywood did not find a truly humorous side of vampires until the more relaxed 1970s. *Love at First Bite* (1979), starring George Hamilton, is perhaps the first “genuinely funny spoof that doesn’t mock its vampires out of existence” (Auerbach 165). The Count, probably in self-aware mockery of trends in both vampire scholarship and Cold War hype, is named “Vladimir.” Renfield, played by Art Carney, who is not a mental patient but a psychologist, diagnoses humanity’s madness rather than suffers from it. He observes, in mockery of post-modernist angst, “In a world without romance, it’s better to be dead” (Love).

Hamilton’s Dracula is a loveable character, in part because of his campy use of humor. Compared with Lugosi’s dry jest (“I don’t drink - vine”), Hamilton observes, when offered some marijuana, “I never drink wine and I do not smoke shit.” Some of his laugh lines are self-evident, such as, “I’m going out for a bite to drink.” Others require a foundation in the Dracula mythos to understand, such as, “Children of the night, shut up!” (Love). The fact that he ends up getting the girl at the end places this Dracula in an entirely new role: that of sympathetic protagonist.

In contrast, the more serious side of vampire film narratives, especially during the hyper-patriarchal 1980s, showed that horror was increasingly a venue for “male exclusivity,” a “boys’ game” into which few girls were allowed (Auerbach 3). Brothers Michael and Sam Emerson, in the film *Lost Boys* (1987), are not only cast adrift in an uncertain world without a solid father figure, but are betrayed to vampires by both the temptress Star and, later, their own mother. The vampires themselves are presented as engaging in “ineffective predation that is joyless to the perpetrators” (Auerbach 166). All of this, however, is something that “only comic book reading boys” can comprehend. Sam’s buddies, the brothers Alan and Edgar Frog, alone hold the keys to understanding what is happening:

Alan: Yeah? You think we just work at a comic book store for our folks, huh?

Sam : Actually I thought it was a bakery.

Edgar : This is just a cover, we're dedicated to a higher purpose. We're fighters for truth, justice and the American way (*Lost*).

Clearly, the vampire mythos has continued to be a venue in which repressed counter-culture aggressiveness against both societal and political inertia can manifest itself. Only later do we learn that the boys’ grandfather was also privy to the vampire activity in town. “One thing about living in Santa Carla I never could stomach,” he tells them after staking the head vampire. “All the damn vampires” (*Lost*). But it is too late; vampires have already been claimed for the younger generation.

For the remainder of the century, vampires would become more serious on film. From Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* to John Carpenter’s *Vampires* to Wesley Snipes in *Blade*, pre-Y2K vampires are fierce creatures not to be trifled with,

sneering down from the top of the food chain. In these films, as in *Lost Boys*, there is no joy left in blood-letting. There was only fear as the millennium drew to a close.

Tricksters and Vampires

With all this fear pervading the screen, a new perspective was needed, a new paradigm. The time had come to awaken the trickster spirit. There are a number of ways in which the vampire tradition already intersects with trickster lore. The complexity of each type of myth lends itself to continual perpetuation and incidental comparison. In *Trickster Makes this World*, Lewis Hyde asserts that the trickster is the “archetype that attacks all other archetypes” (Hyde 14). Accordingly, William Hynes and William Doty explain in *Mythical Trickster Figures* that tricksters encompass “many different social positions, [are] utilized by different societies to inculcate various types of behavior and may have manifold modes of appearance, even within one culture” (9). Hyde further describes the trickster as “a consummate survivor in a shifting world” (43). This all sounds vaguely familiar.

Tricksters, like vampires, have associations with blood, death, sex and evil. Laura Makarius explains that the trickster, in the role of “necessary breaker of taboos,” interferes with all of these at different times (66). First and foremost, in comparison with vampires, the trickster is a “violator of the blood taboo,” and traffics in all manner of bodily fluids, including “blood, menstruations, childbirths, excrement, corpses [...] all that which is *impure* is his” (Makarius 71, 85). Makarius warns that “we should not be astonished when his behavior is dirty, obscene, or gross” (85). The associations with

“epi-predators” such as coyote, fox, or raven especially mark the trickster as a creature of blood appetite and his “plasticity” further evokes his ability to negotiate fluids (Hyde 75, 43).

As a psychopomp, the trickster is often a “mediator who crosses and resets the line between life and death,” as exemplified by both Orpheus’ and Coyote’s journeys to the underworld to retrieve their wives (Hynes 40, Hyde 83-86). Ananse the spider, an African trickster, also passes from death to life, but brings with him alternately golden gifts and the pathogen which makes humans mortal, according to Christopher Vecsey (114). This parallel to vampires is further highlighted by the trickster’s auxiliary role as “God of the Crossroads” (Hyde 108). In this role, he mediates not only between life and death, but between gods and mortals. He is neither one, nor the other, perpetually marginalized by his “betters” in both realms (Hyde 204).

In addition, both Hynes and Makarius inform us that “sexual exploits abound in most trickster myths,” as manifest by Raven’s oversized sexual organs or the West African Legba’s “insatiable sexual appetite” (Hynes 43, Makarius 79). While perceptions of vampire sexual behavior have fluctuated between violent and seductive, it nevertheless is similar to the trickster construct. Tricksters will go to great lengths and even broach the taboos of incest, to satisfy their sexual urges. For example, Manabozo pretends to be dead to lure his sister into submission and Maui lassoes the sun to gain access to her private parts (Makarius 75, 77).

As “deceiver” and “trick-player,” the trickster is often associated with Lucifer in the Garden of Eden and his corollaries in other cultures (Hynes 35,37). Early vampires,

as I mentioned, have also had Satanic connotations, as demonstrated by their connections to Lilith and her counterparts. Even “the Draculas,” according to Van Helsing, were “scions who were held by their coevals to have had dealings with the Evil One” (Stoker 241). Yet Hynes and Doty insists that, from his understanding, “the Devil and the trickster are not the same thing [...] the Devil is an agent of evil, but trickster is *amoral*, not *immoral*. He embodies and enacts that large portion of our experience where good and evil are hopelessly intertwined” (10).

There is also the trickster’s ability to shape-shift as vampires do. As “ambiguous and anomalous,” the trickster is “always more than can be glimpsed at any one place or any one embodiment” (Hynes 34-5). A creature that can “adapt itself to a changing world,” the trickster proves himself to be the “master of metamorphosis” (Hyde 43, Hynes 37). As with the *ch’ing shih* and the *bhuta*, incubi and succubi, “not even the boundaries of species or sexuality are safe, for they can be readily dissolved by the trickster’s disguises and transmorphisms” (Hynes 36). If Coleridge and LeFanu had been mindful of this, perhaps we need to consider that Carmilla and Christabel weren’t just seductive women after all.

Yet what most distinctly sets the trickster apart from the vampire is his role as “situation inverter” (Hynes 37). For the trickster, nothing is sacred; in fact he is a “sacred and lewd bricoleur,” who delights in the mixing and blurring of lines which have been drawn by whatever powers hold sway (Hynes 42). This is accomplished with relish in his role as “comedian and wit,” for “humor and laughter are part of the identikit of the divine trickster” (Doty 58). Indeed, Hyde identifies the trickster’s ability to create a

“corridor of humor [...] a pore through which fluid may move into new areas” (274). In this role as “metaplayer,” trickster explores the notion that “the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy” (Hynes 202, O’Connor qtd. in Hynes 203). Nevertheless, even humor is not sacrosanct to the trickster and when you have come to expect it, even that expectation will fail.

Still, even these assessments of the trickster are as limited in their scope as those of the vampire. Both are designed to sum up entities that are equally resistant to simple exposition. But it is necessary to try to distill a bit of their combined essence in order to begin to glimpse the significance of *Buffy*’s contribution to our textual environment and how this significance bleeds over into other matters.

Buffy as Meta-Vampire/Trickster

We have seen that trying to pinpoint a single origin or definition for either vampires or tricksters, from oral tradition to film, is a complicated endeavor, which *Buffy*’s world reflects. In as much as *Buffy*’s mythology deviates in many regards from the standard retellings of British Literature, a broader world view brings into perspective the diversity and complexity of the vampire/demon personae Giles invokes in his alternative creation story. With this in mind, we are better able to investigate why Whedon chose this venue as a platform from which to launch his hero, *Buffy*, on television. At least a part of the justification for literary analysis of *Buffy* stems from the text’s ties to the established telling of vampire stories, but what is more significant is the manner in which it departs from them, and creates something new.

By both referencing and reconstructing what has gone before, as well as incorporating other mythological constructs, *Buffy* accomplishes a heightened degree of bricolage that reaches beyond the traditional vampire genre. This bricolage becomes a meta-vampire/trickster narrative. It is both about and beyond conventional science fiction and horror, beyond even most trickster hijinks. While incorporating humor, the admixture of forms goes beyond parody or even satire by also adeptly addressing romance. While familiar in many regards, this narrative is unlike any of its predecessors, in a number of ways.

To begin with, early vampire characters in *Buffy*, like her nemesis in Season One, The Master, are definitely less like the suave British vampires than like the vampires of folk tales and the manner in which they interact with the demon world reflects their multiplicity. Still, *Buffy* owes a debt to the cinematic vampires of the twentieth century as much as Stoker owes a debt to the literary vampires of the nineteenth century. The Master bears a strong resemblance to Murnau's *Nosferatu* and his lackey, Luke, could be easily mistaken for a cast off from a film of the Hammer oeuvre. Even these serious iconoclasts show some unexpected color. Following a pre-apocalyptic earthquake, the Master turns to another lackey and asks, like a jaded Californian, "Whadya think: five point oh?" ("Prophecy Girl" 1.12).

Simultaneously, *Buffy* capably incorporates romantic vampire themes as well. Just as with Lord Ruthven, the concept of friendship is pivotal in the Whedonverse. In contrast with the Master, the vampire Angel, who first comes to Buffy as "a friend," is somewhat reminiscent of early nineteenth-century vampires ("Welcome" 1.1). Angel's

enigmatic appearances at night, sometimes at Buffy's window, do not clearly identify him as a vampire at first for either Buffy or the audience. He tells her when they first meet, "Don't worry, I don't bite," leading her off the trail ("Welcome" 1.1). Still, his nightly encounters with her leave room for suspicion. After all, which is worse: a vampire or a human stalker? Thus, we have a contemporary twist.

Another literary incorporation is female vampiric characters, which were hard to come by for a long time following *Carmilla's* demise and were usually mere victims of the head vampire, such as *Dracula's* Lucy or the *Lost Boys* Star. But the opening sequence of *Buffy's* first episode introduces us to a character named Darla. In true situation-inverting trickster fashion, she attacks the boy we think is going to be the aggressor ("Welcome" 1.1). Like Christabel and *Carmilla*, she is charismatic and seductive, as well as cute and blonde, like the show's namesake. We learn later that she is Angel's "sire" and as such was once both his ostensible mother and lover, a blend of broken taboos. When, after a long separation, they meet once more, Darla identifies herself as "a friend" before Angel points out to her that he's neither one of "them" anymore (vampires) nor human, thanks to a Gypsy curse, yet another inversion of the expected and a reminder of ties to trickster lore ("Angel" 1.7).

As Angel later explains to Buffy, "For a hundred years I offered an ugly death to everyone I met and I did it with a song in my heart." When she asks him what changed, he tells her, "[I] Fed on a girl about your age... beautiful, dumb as a post... but a favorite among her clan [...] Romany Gypsies. The elders conjured the perfect punishment for me. They restored my soul."

Buffy quips, “What, they were all out of boils and blinding torment?” He further elucidates as follows:

When you become a vampire the demon takes your body but it doesn't get your soul. That's gone. No conscience, no remorse... It's an easy way to live. You have no idea what it's like to have done the things I've done... and to care. I haven't fed on a living human being since that day. (“Angel” 1.7).

Angel is not the first vampire to be burdened by a desire for redemption. Nick Knight, of the television series *Forever Knight*, was a proto-Angelic character in his time, seeking a way to live within the human world without succumbing to his hunger, to “repay society for his sins” (Day 153). As with Dracula, the question of salvation is serious business. But where *Buffy* departs from this construct is in introducing humor into the answer.

This becomes apparent when, in a later episode, Buffy’s best friend Willow encounters a trans-dimensional doppelganger who happens to be a vampire. Angel’s previous explanation of how vampires relate to the former self comes to Buffy’s mind. After Willow observes that her twin is “evil and skanky and [in an aside] I think I’m kinda gay,” Buffy assures her that “a vampire’s personality has nothing to do with the person it was.” Angel starts to insist, “Well, actually...” but when Buffy gives him a certain look, he defers to her viewpoint, saying, “That’s a good point” (“Doppelgangeland” 3.16). Willow later turns out to be a lesbian, taking the comic twist to yet another level and again conjuring associations with *Carmilla*.

In another comic twist, the vampire Spike aids Buffy in her battles during Season Four for his own largely selfish reasons. When she catches him tasting his own nose-blood after he’s been punched, she tells him, “I’m too grossed out to hear anything you

have to say,” reminding us of Makarius’ assessment of the disgusting behavior of tricksters. He responds, “What? It’s blood; it’s what I do” (“Out of My Mind” 5.4). However, as we have seen already, that is not all that vampires do, nor tricksters for that matter. This is just the beginning, although Spike himself will give us more insight into the twin roles of vampires and tricksters in repressive circumstances and how it is the “unexpected sally [that] makes you laugh” (Hyde 131). But first, we will identify various means of disruption within literary contexts of the late twentieth century into which Buffy was born.

“NEEDING TO KNOW THE PLURAL OF APOCALYPSE:”

BUFFY'S LESSONS IN DISMANTLING MEANING

SPIKE: I must be a noble vampire. A good guy. On a mission of redemption. I help the hopeless. I'm a vampire with a soul.

BUFFY: A vampire with a soul? Oh, my god! How lame is that?
 (“Tabula Rasa” 6.8)

In the above scene, Spike and Buffy have both lost their memories due to a spell of Willow’s that went awry. Having just realized simultaneously that he is a vampire and yet has no desire to bite or contend with Buffy, Spike (who has for the moment dubbed himself “Randy”) tries to explain the phenomenon to Buffy (aka: “Joan”). The only problem is that Spike doesn’t really “know”; he is merely drawing conclusions based on the facts at hand and those “facts” are limited by their current situation. Buffy is quick to point out the flaw in his reasoning, while coincidentally both highlighting and mocking one of the key premises of the entire series. Although Angel has long since gone on to his own series at this point, the supposition of his soulfulness is the *sine qui non* of Buffy’s interactions with the world of demons. And yet, as she points out, that supposition is ridiculous.

This ridiculousness highlights the inherent lie in texts, in language, in the very process of perception that determine our interaction with the world. Any aspect of a text is meaningful because its meaningfulness has been designated as such by the demands of the moment and that meaningfulness can just as easily be taken away by any other aspect of or moment within the text. We understand that all fictional storytelling is about lies and yet – as Coleridge says – we submit to that “willing suspension of disbelief” as we

enter into it (Critical 322). But lying, as yet another domain of the trickster, carries over into the real world in ways that are not so easily condensed.

Recognizing both lies and ridiculousness as necessary for creating meaning gives a twist to the esteem we have long placed on many myths and a great deal of literature. We discover, upon close examination, that even the most venerated of tales in the Western tradition become just ordinary words without the “twist” that jolts us from our reverie. Even serious stories are often silly at times, but we especially need the blatantly ridiculous ones and we don’t need to know exactly why, because the why is often beyond absolute comprehension. Part of the reason for making up stories is to mediate the space between the incomprehensible and the urge to try to comprehend, as described by Craig Simpson’s comparison of telemyths and ancient myth (see Introduction). Once more, we find ourselves in the mediating province of the trickster.

Both Lewis Hyde and William Hynes identify the trickster’s roles as artist, linguist and bricoleur (Hyde 254, 78-80, 75-76, Hynes 34, 210 - 212). These are roles that are inextricably connected to one another, as well as to the roles of mediator and liar, in storytelling (Hyde 60, 258-9, Hynes 35, 39-40). In many cultural traditions, the trickster has the onus of being responsible for creating meaning out of the “dirt” that accumulates in the crevasses which polite society has cast off and “erasing the line between the dirty and the clean” (Hyde 177). Hyde refers to this job as “dirt work” and explains that “dirt is always a by-product of creating order” (166). We are all, to some degree, workers in this business of trying to analyze the way the world is ordered and as

such, there is a certain trickster sensibility to what both scientists and critics, artists and linguists are doing. Accordingly, our necessity seems to makes us valuable.

But in seeing our own necessity, we may find ourselves drifting into the role of that trickster foil Robert Pelton calls “Hate-to-be-contradicted” (124). Caught up in the balancing act between binary oppositional forces, we must keep our eye on how idealizing or reifying one mode of conceptualization automatically creates a reciprocally problematic mirror image. But tricksters, ultimately, are about the space in between, the balancing act, the liminalities and the gray areas, or as *Buffy* scholars J.Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson state, “the Technicolor we never saw before” (Rabb 94). Accordingly, the emphasis on shaking up the “fundamental totalizing principle” behind such distinctions as black and white, right and wrong, good and evil, are at the heart of Jacques Derrida’s idea of “differance” (5).

Buffy Meets Derrida

In *Dissemination*, Derrida reminds us of the perils of identifiable privileging in his analysis of Socrates’ retelling of the story of Theuth⁷ in *Phaedrus*. Theuth, as both Derrida and Socrates explain, is the Egyptian god of a number of innovative trends, or “arts,” including mathematics, astronomy, “draughts and dice,” and most notably, writing. Each of these he brings before the God/King Thamus to be utilized as a *pharamokon*, a “recipe” as he describes it, for “both memory and wisdom” (Derrida 75).

⁷ I must note the inclusion of Theuth in the Whedonverse, albeit indirectly. In the episode “The Replacement,” Xander is split into two versions of himself by the demon *Toth*, an ironic twist on the Egyptian myth and both the Socratic and Derridian interpretations of it. But that must be explored another day.

Thamus is instantly suspicious of the creation of writing, for his spoken word has always been “law” and there has never been a need to question its efficacy. He designates writing as a “patricidal subversion,” a “criminal thing, a poisoned present” (Derrida 77). Thereafter, Derrida informs us, “the father is always suspicious and watchful toward writing” (76). It’s too difficult to control.

Yet the very beauty of writing is in its ability to resist control. Derrida explains that with the *pharmakon* of writing, polarities can be explored as the “common element or medium of any possible dissociation.” In so doing, it becomes ambivalent and “because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other” (127). This slipperiness and fluidity is very trickster-like.

Like writing, Theuth (aka: Thoth or Toth) relates to tricksters, as shown by Derrida’s further explanation that “the god Thoth had several faces, belonged to several eras, lived in several homes” (86). Theuth may well have been a variation on another African trickster, Legba, who is also credited with being the “High God’s linguist” and – significantly – the “originator of magic” (Pelton 126). Designating writing as the domain of the trickster demonstrates the variability of language, especially in its written form and Derrida expounds on this point. He emphasizes the way in which, in accordance with the Greek *philosopheme*, writing (and its designated gods) are often placed in a subordinate position to the High God to highlight their inferiority and yet in

the Egyptian tradition Theuth is designated as the “executor, through language, of Horus’⁸ creative project” (88).

Writing is, as Derrida describes it, a “process of substitution, which thus functions as a pure *play* of traces or supplements or, again, operates within the order of the pure signifier which no reality, no absolutely external reference, no transcendental signified, can come to limit.” This “play of words” which is the trickster’s arena, includes “plots, perfidious intrigues and conspiracies to usurp the throne” (89). Accordingly, we are reminded how it is through the utilization of language and its disruptive capacity that a trickster can overcome the perpetual potential stagnation of the status quo.

Today, we are not far removed from the cusp of the 21st century and we find ourselves in a time (as I explained earlier) of intense seriousness, a time when the entertainment preference over the last several years has been a new genre called “reality” television. Even that old reliable standby, the sitcom, has been edged out for this supposed taste of the “truth” about other people’s lives. Playfulness has been replaced with meanness and petty tyranny and artful writing has been replaced by, well, people talking “smack.” But this “reality” is no closer to expressing our hopes and fears; in fact, they are probably farther away. There is a need, a desperate need, to upset the increasingly perplexing *zeitgeist*. A new kind of writing is in order, a writing style that plays with meanings in a whole new way. *Buffy* rises to the challenge.

We can’t help considering Derrida’s principle of the *play of meaning* when analyzing *Buffy*. A word that is repeatedly used to describe the series text amongst

⁸ Horus is the egg to Thamus/Ammon - Ra’s chicken; which came first?

scholars interested in it is “polysemic” (Wilcox 243). The continually expanding and contracting nature of meanings within each episode is ripe for dismantling, reassembling and thoughtful critical analysis. Rhonda Wilcox, a scholar who has devoted much writing to the Whedonverse and author of *Why Buffy Matters*, has engaged in such analysis with great gusto. In Wilcox’s estimation, “a true artist’s work will say more than can be known by any one mind at any one time, more than can be articulated by any one critic, or even by the artist, except *through* the work” (149).

Buffy Meets Jameson

Before we can fully consider Wilcox’s assertion, we must examine the question of whether or not *Buffy* can or, indeed, *should* be considered “art.” Television series are increasingly considered “worthy” of critical inquiry and within that niche, critic Robert Hanks claims that “four or five episodes of *Buffy* would be on my list of the ten best pieces of television drama ever made” (qtd. in Wilcox 131). Yet television still must contend with Frederic Jameson’s conception of “total flow,” the idea that “the contents of the screen streaming before us all day long without interruption” makes critical distance “obsolete” (70). He further argues that “enlarged possibilities” of this mass venue are so bewildering that “one is tempted to wonder whether any description or theory could ever encompass their variety” (71). For Jameson, all television becomes an incomprehensible blur. The only moments of lucidity are when “the mind’s deeper currents [are] surprised by indirection, sometimes, indeed, by treachery and ruse” (71). *Buffy* represents one such “moment.”

As a trickster entity in the midst of its own multiplicity, the text of *Buffy* takes on a life of its own, beyond what Whedon or any of his co-authors may have intended. Hence, when I refer to *Buffy*, I refer to not just the writers or even the writing itself, but to the creation which has emerged from the many and varied components which have gone into its making. The reason that *Buffy* succeeds in holding its own is because it does what “good” stories have always done, though its unique brand of authorship, word play, intertextuality and new inventions of meaning, giving it an innovative edge. It is not for the masses, yet it is not for the elite. It is for both and neither. It simultaneously broadens and contracts the narrative world.

Agile Authorship

Interestingly, Wilcox, like many other Whedon scholars, has a tendency to specifically identify the Whedonverse as the product of Joss Whedon (hence the name). While she gives the occasional nod to the variety of other creative personalities who contribute to the overall text and production of *Buffy*, (e.g. production designer Carey Meyer, soundtrack composer Christophe Beck and fellow writers Jane Espenson, David Fury and Marti Noxon, to name just a few), Wilcox also is quick to ascribe to Whedon the role of *auteur*, in film parlance the “one person, generally the director [who] is in creative control” (5). She even venerates him as being akin to the “master builder of a cathedral” which a number of people work on over the years, but over which he is the guiding artistic force (5).

I propose, in the disruptive spirit of the trickster, an alternative reading of Whedon's role. The trickster is not only polysemic, but polytropic, as Hyde tells us, "changing his skin or shifting his shape as the situation requires" (62). Religious scholar William Doty states that "multiplicity and paradoxicality" are trickster trademarks and the situation of *Buffy's* creation is redolent with multiple personality disorder (48). The writing of *Buffy*, in terms of authorship, is not merely a product of Whedon's admittedly expansive vision, but a perhaps unprecedented mixture of authorial input and fan influence, a polyvalent exercise from any viewpoint. Whatever his intentions may have been – and we are given a fair amount of insight into those intentions in his director's commentaries, among other things – they are mitigated by the fact that, as Wimsatt and Beardsley put it, a knowledge of the writer's intentions is not "desirable as a standard of judging the success of a work of literary art" (Critical 749).

True, Whedon did assemble the often fluctuating team of co-writers who took turns being the lead writer for any given episode. Yet each episode was then filtered through the team, who gave creative input. Whedon himself gave the final approval, often with some additions of his own. Writer and executive producer Jane Espenson relates that whenever someone raves about a particular line from one of the shows she "wrote," it is usually one of Whedon's additions. Many of the jokes, in particular, were either written by him or pitched when working out the story ("Buffyspeak" 3.3). From this perspective, perhaps Wilcox is right in her assessment of Whedon as *auteur*. Still, to give Whedon credit alone is to try to corral the trickster spirit which permeates *Buffy's* creation.

The authorship of *Buffy* thus involves a somewhat inverted version of hyperauthorship, in which the creative process – as Mikhael Epstein describes in his letter to Motokiyu regarding the Yasusada hoax – is “dispersed among several virtual personalities which cannot be reduced to a single "real" personality“ (Feb. 6 par 4). Accordingly, it takes on an element of *hypo*authorship. The personality of the creator/author becomes openly channeled through a host of other authors in a sort of forum, creating a species of *uber*author. The practice is then turned around and funneled back through the original author/creator’s voice, somewhat like an hourglass. Per Wilcox, the progression is even more expanded by the input of fan opinion, mostly through chat rooms via the internet and then impressively reduced by the collective authorial willingness to be receptive to such communal pressure (Wilcox 131). Thus, trickster-like, the writing “colors [it]self to fit [its] surroundings” (Hyde 53). But then some might argue that writing has always done this to some extent, whether consciously or unconsciously, by authors from time immemorial.

Witty Word Play

Still, another facet of what sets *Buffy* apart is the manner in which all this multitudinous input results in a densely complex expressiveness. Much of the language of the series centers around already-established terminologies/concepts such as “The Big Bad” (a clipped version of “the big, bad wolf” in Disney’s *The Three Little Pigs*, therefore signifying the villain of a particular piece) and the “Scooby Gang” (a pop culture reference to the group of teenagers in the *Scooby Doo* cartoon series and thus

signifying a similar group intent on solving mysteries, in this case Buffy and the other three core characters, Giles, Willow and Xander). Such references demonstrate what Derrida refers to as the “disappearance of originary presence” and call into question the “source“ of such terms from even earlier than the days of Disney animation or the advent of Saturday morning children’s programming (Derrida 168).

The scripts also capitalize on the popularity of teen movies and television, from *Clueless* to *Heathers* to *My So-Called Life*, for the tenor of their witty banter (Byers 206). Much of the humor in *Buffy* relies on the “tracks with multiple meanings [and] ambiguity” which are inherent in both written and spoken language, the trickster’s sphere of influence (Hyde 51). The way in which meaning in language can “infinitely promise and vanish” is explored over and over in many episodes (Derrida 128). For example, in the episode “Lie to Me,” Buffy’s best friends, Willow and Xander, engage in the following exchange after entering a club full of people who worship vampires:

WILLOW: Boy, we blend right in.

XANDER: In no way do we stick out like sore thumbs.[...]

WILLOW: Okay, but do they really stick out?

XANDER: What?

WILLOW: Sore thumbs. Do they stick out? I mean, have you ever seen a thumb and gone, 'Wow! That baby is sore!'

XANDER: You have too many thoughts. (“Lie to Me” 7.2)

Such inquisition into the actual play of meaning in a phrase or word is common throughout the text. Another exchange between Buffy and Angel is as follows:

ANGEL: I watched you and I saw you called. It was a bright afternoon out in front of your school. You walked down the steps... and I loved you.

BUFFY: Why?

ANGEL: Because I could see your heart. You held it before you for everyone to see. And I worried that it would be bruised or torn. And more than anything in my life, I wanted to keep it safe... to warm it with my own.

[...]

BUFFY: That's beautiful. (*beat*) Or taken literally, incredibly gross.

ANGEL: I was just thinking that, too. ("Helpless" 3.12)

Another pair of instances involves Buffy in conversation with Giles. In "What's My Line, Part 1," Buffy contemplates the phrase "the whole nine yards" asking "nine yards of what?" (2.9). Similarly, in "No Place Like Home," she reflects on the concept of making money "hand over fist," waving her hand over her fist in puzzlement (5.5). In another episode, "A New Man," Buffy tells an appalled Giles that he has "but-face," and has to clarify, "You look like you're going to say 'but'" (4.12). When Willow first tells Buffy that Professor Walsh is world-renowned, Buffy asks, "Do you have to be 'nowned' first?" Willow responds, "Yes, first there is the painful 'nowning' process" ("The Freshman" 4.1). Numerous other cases abound, but these will suffice to show how the writers, via their characters, frequently indulge in the play of meaning to which Derrida refers (168).

Yet *Buffy's* writers are not content to toy with well-used idioms or homophones for play. Drawing upon the extensive resources of its intertextuality, from plot to phrase levels, the writers engage in the trickster's art of bricolage to create something completely new (Hynes 42). As Michael Adams, author of *Slayer Slang: A Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer *Lexicon*,⁹ explains, “the show does more than merely capture current teen slang [or past Hollywood history]; rather, it is endlessly, if unevenly, inventive” (26).

Playing with meanings running even more deeply than that of common expressions, *Buffy* begins to expand the vocabulary of its characters by creating new words and word usage.

Experimentation with prefixes such as *un-* and suffixes such as *-y* are just two common examples. Such expressions as “Don’t get all twelve step-y” and “You seem bad mood-y” have meanings that are comprehensible but not exactly standard English (3.17, 6.7). Adams explains that, when Willow once says of Giles that he was “unmad,” or Buffy refers to Angel as an “undead American,” such constructions “reflect meaning inadequately conveyed in the standard lexicon [...] When one is *unmad*, one certainly isn’t angry, but there is no reason to assume that one is happy, either.” In so doing, “the word mediates two common emotional states and thus identifies a third” (31). While the term *undead* is not new, it likewise reflects a state which is neither dead nor alive. Duly, in such cases the text acts not only as bricoleur, but also as mediator and deconstructor of oppositions (Hynes 40, Derrida 85).

Adams identifies other constructions which are seen often in the show, such as the use of *over-* as a prefix (“He’s not exactly one to overshare”) and the uses of *-free* and *-age* as suffixes (“I want to be fester-free,” and “the whole post-slayage nap thing”) (32). The various uses of the word *thing* alone could occupy much of this chapter, probably more, but Adams identifies its *Buffy*-ized usage as a “situation, tendency, or predilection” (249). I’ve also observed, in just a couple of examples, that it stands in as a signifier for

⁹ Careful readers will note in the bibliography that *Slayer Slang* is published by the Oxford University Press, a curious case of legitimization of the topic.

“an event or appointment,” as when Willow says, “I’m gonna do... the thing [...] So, I’ll see you after Wicca group?” (4.6). Another interpretation is expressed by the vampire Spike, who tells Willow’s girlfriend Tara of a mysterious leg cramp, “What! It’s a thing,” meaning “a legitimate occurrence” (7.14). The variations are many, but the meaning is always clear within the context, highlighting the variability of even the simplest of words and thus the correlation between tricksters and language.

Similarly, the text of *Buffy* extensively experiments with what Adams calls “clipping.” Adams says that the teens (and later young adults) on the show are one step ahead of slang dictionaries, taking terms like *flake out*, *wig out* and *bail out*, as well as *messed up*, *team up* and *deal with* and reducing them to *flake*, *wig*, *bail*, *messed*, *team* and *deal*. (39). Another practice that “reinvigorates common items from the standard lexicon” is the shifting of adjectives, especially emotional ones, to nouns. The character Xander often uses this construction, when he says things like “After everything that happened, I leaned towards the postal,” and “I want to know, ’cause it gives me a happy” (3.7, 2.7). In such interpretation, we once more see the trickster as linguist and translator operating throughout *Buffy*’s text (Hyde 299).

Intensive Intertextuality

Furthermore, the writing team is often inspired by other writers or directorial style icons, frequently playing the mimic, often parodically, sometimes with great satirical finesse. In “The Pack,” an episode in which Xander becomes possessed by a hyena spirit, the cinematography evokes the stylistic elements of Francis Ford Coppola’s *The*

Outsiders (1.6). The Thanksgiving episode, “Pangs,” in which Willow and Giles argue about the plight of Native Americans, devolves into a mock-Western, evocative of John Ford movies, with the “heroes” riding to the rescue on bicycles with galloping orchestral music in the background (4.8). Like *Miami Vice*, directed by Michael Mann, *Buffy* relies heavily on music to set the tone of the series and even features many bands on the show itself, further expanding intertextual content with their lyrics.

Other matters of intertextuality are extensive. The *Buffy* scripts, in their entirety, represent a considerable catalog of not only pop culture references, but also Hollywood, literary, mythological, legendary and “legitimate” history. There are portions of many websites devoted to chronicling every referent, from *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* quips to Shakespeare and William Burroughs (e.g. [Buffyguide](#), [Buffyology](#)). As already demonstrated, the basic vampire construct itself relies heavily on Stoker’s *Dracula* but also includes other film and literary components. The character of Buffy is based on Whedon’s perception that there were “so many horror movies where there was that blonde girl who always got herself killed.” He wanted her to “take back the night [a phrase itself gleaned from rape awareness campaigns],” and created an environment in which “she’s not only ready for [the monster, but] she trounces him” (“Interview” 1.1).

After thus inverting the horror genre, Whedon and company dedicate much of Season One and a considerable part of the Season Two, to recycled horror themes, including *The Bride of Frankenstein* (“Some Assembly Required” 2.2) *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (“Phases” 2.15), *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (“Go Fish” 2.20), *Carrie* (“Witch” 1.3), *Alien* (“Bad Eggs” 2.12 and “Ted” 2.11), *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

(“Nightmares” 1.10) and *Childsplay* (“The Puppet Show” 1.9). As the seasons progress, *Buffy* takes on the horrific elements of fairy tales, at times specifically (*Hansel and Gretel* in “Gingerbread” 3.11, *Little Red Riding Hood* in “Helpless” 3.12), at times allegorically (the Kindestod in “Killed by Death” 2.18 and the Gentlemen in “Hush” 4.10).

But for all this seeming dreadfulness, each of these is executed with such dry humor and irony that we never lose sight of the way that the writing plays with us. *Buffy* is not just about horror, any more than it is just about vampires. David Boreanaz, the actor who plays the vampire Angel, explains, “You can’t really pin *Buffy* as an action show or a dramatic series or a comedy [or horror or romance]; it has elements of all of that [and] breaks it up. One moment you can be enthralled by the adventure, the next you can be saddened by the drama,” and the moment after that you are laughing until you cry. (“Interview” 1.1) In so doing, the show “appears on the edge, or just beyond existing borders, classifications and categories,” where Hynes tells us a liminal trickster would dwell (34).

Feeling Restless

One episode, entitled “Restless,” breaks down the very boundaries of plot construction by engaging in a series of dream sequences. While still drawing on established directorial styles and motifs, including Stephen Soderbergh’s *The Limey* and another Francis Ford Coppola film, *Apocalypse Now*, Whedon and company throw in imagery and dialogue stylings from Tom Clancy movies, *Death of a Salesman*, 1930’s

horror films, the musical *Chicago*, Barbara Stanwyck-style acting, *Apocalypse Now*,¹⁰ and a host of Freudian dream metaphors (“Director’s Commentary” 4.22). While the dreams expand on and develop the existing storyline, they represent a hodgepodge of images and ideas reminiscent of popular culture that are accessible even to those unfamiliar with the characters or plot. We see how, through the medium of dreams and the way that they are inherently intertextual, a text can “give lie to the inconvenient world of fact” and explore the “otherness” which Hynes associates with “metaplay” (214).

When Whedon was first drafting the script for “Restless,” he explains that he thought of it as writing a “tone poem” and intended for it to be as random and playful as he could make it, within certain parameters (“Director’s Commentary” 4.22). Wilcox takes the poetic reference one step farther and compares “Restless” to T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, stating that “both overcome the fragmentation by thematic unity and the power of myth” (163). Wilcox brings up the role of Tara, Willow’s lover, within the episode, whom she compares to Eliot’s Tiresias inasmuch as she plays the role of seer and prophet. We first see her in Willow’s dream as Willow is writing (per Whedon) a Sapphic love poem on her back, which yields yet another connection to poetry.

Again in relation to Eliot, this end-of-season episode is not truly an ending, in the first place bucking the tradition of having the big showdown with the villain as the finale, but it also correlates in both name and tenor to Eliot’s plea at the end of *Wasteland* for “that peace that passeth understanding” (qtd. in Wilcox 172). As Tara/Tiresias explains to Buffy, “You think you know who you are, what’s to come? You haven’t even begun”

¹⁰ Of course, *Apocalypse Now* is itself an intertextual variation on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

(4.22). There will be no rest for Buffy or her friends. They are caught up the endless cycle of the narrative process, regenerative in its extremity. Indeed, Buffy will face her greatest challenges during the remainder of the series.

The Need to Hush

While “Restless” takes the ridiculousness of language to a level of ambiguity and the limits of reassemblage unseen elsewhere, only in the episode “Hush” are we permitted to explore its necessity and its associations with self-preservation. When the entire town of Sunnydale is silenced by a magic box possessed by the mysterious “Gentlemen,” victims become helpless to cry out when their hearts are cut from their chests. These “fairy tale creatures,” as Giles dubs them, are “possibly the most frightening monsters in the *Buffy* series” (Wilcox 150). They are wearing Victorian style black suits and they look like “dead, white, well-to-do, upper class, old-fashioned males” who are “indicative of the monied male power structure” we have come to associate with colonialism. But as Wilcox points out, there is more to their threat than the implications of patriarchy; “They are not just political symbols,” she explains. “They also symbolize mortality and something about sex, something we can all relate to – the kind of basic foundational experience and fear that make the bones of a good fairy tale” (Wilcox 151).

Both political oppression and sexual repression are all about the suppression of language. By restricting vocalization, the “Gentlemen” are gruesomely re-enacting a violation of free will that we associate with the heart. Our ability to express our desires, whether politically or personally, is bound up in the intricacies of expression. Ever in

trickster mode, however, the “text” finds ways to express beyond the spoken word.

While the characters have no dialogue for nearly half an hour, they exchange information by way of written notes, a computer screen, hands gestures and a vivid, childlike transparency presentation drawn by Giles, complete with illustrated spurting blood. It is by means of these alternative modes of communication that Buffy is able to regain her voice and defeat the monster.

Yet, while vocalization is the tool by which the protagonists triumph, speech is shown to create confusion as well. In the opening scene, Buffy is once again inhabiting the world of dreams we became familiar with in “Restless,” in which her new love interest, Riley, informs her, “If I kiss you, it’ll make the sun go down.” She consents, and following the kiss, says, “Fortune favors the brave.” But in the waking world, the chit-chat she and Riley engage in interferes with their real desires. Willow complains that a Wicca group she wanted to join was, “Talk-- all talk. Blah blah-- Gaia-- blah blah-- moon, menstrual, lifeorce, power thingy [...] just a bunch of wanna Blessed-Be's.” And when she asks Buffy how things are going with Riley, Buffy responds, “See above, RE: talk – all talk.” The interference of language that has little meaning also gets in the way of Tara’s first meeting with Willow, when she is too shy to speak (“Hush” 4.10).

Only when they are deprived of their voices are the two sets of soon-to-be lovers able to connect. Likewise, Xander and Anya, who have been arguing about what exactly Anya “means” to Xander, only make up when – after a false alarm with Xander thinking Spike is attacking Anya – Anya makes a suggestive hand gesture and the two go off to

make up and make love. Clearly, the primitive, pre-linguistic methods of communication are in full operational mode, as expressed by Dr. Walsh in her prologue to the episode:

So this is what it is, talking about communication, talking about language... not the same thing. It's about inspiration. Not the idea, but the moment before the idea when it blossoms in your mind and connects to everything. It's about the thoughts and experiences that we don't have a word for. ("Hush" 4. 10)

There are not only physiological forces at work in these moments, but the “emotional and thematic significance” that Wilcox identifies as an outgrowth of the “formal experimentation” that the writers have engaged in (12). In their use of language to investigate the significance of its limitations, we can see just how wily the writers have become.

As for Riley, who is not yet so wily himself – despite his rhyming name – the Iowa farmboy has a lot to learn about Buffy’s ever-expanding universe. When, a couple of episodes later, he is informed of Buffy’s considerable resume of world-saving battles, he admits, in awe, “I suddenly find myself needing to know the plural of ‘apocalypse’” (“A New Man” 4.12). He has stumbled upon the playfully shifting meanings that are intrinsic to the crafty narrative world he inhabits, a deconstructing trickster universe full of post-modern possibility that is so far beyond ridiculous as to be profound.

“A LITTLE *LESS* RITUAL AND A LITTLE *MORE* FUN:”

EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED FROM *BUFFY'S* SPIKE

Buffy: Does it ever get easy? [...]

Giles: You mean life?

Buffy: Yeah. Does it ever get easy?

Giles: [a little flummoxed] What do you want me to say?

Buffy: Lie to me.

Giles: [after a moment] Yes. It's terribly simple. The good guys are always stalwart and true. The bad guys are easily distinguished by their pointy horns and black hats and we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies and everybody lives happily ever after.

Buffy: Liar. (“Lie to Me” 2.7)

This exchange takes place between Buffy and her watcher following the death of her friend Billy “Ford” Fordham. An old crush from Buffy’s childhood days, Ford moves to Sunnydale and, at first, seems to fit in with the gang. When it turns out that he is part of a cult that worships vampires and hopes to betray the Slayer for a chance at immortality, it is easy to characterize Ford as the “bad guy” of the episode. He later reveals to Buffy that he is dying of brain cancer and for the first time in our acquaintance with her, the certainty of Buffy’s self-righteousness falters. While she does not “save” Ford, she is conflicted about her choice and yearns for the time when such decisions were “simple.” Throughout the course of her development, we’ll see her struggle with this ambiguity of characterization again and again, even as it ties in with the telling of both stories and lies.

Indeterminate characterization and lies both evoke tricksters. While I’ve established the vampire/trickster as a construct which manifests itself as a disruptive narrative, both elements are most often earmarked as characters. In exploring the

characterization within *Buffy*, however, we find that there are several individuals who demonstrate trickster traits beyond the vampires themselves. Without a doubt, the vampires do operate in this capacity, especially one (Spike) that I will discuss shortly, but the crossover between various types of characterization demonstrates the fluidity of the text itself. Although there are occasional tongue-in-cheek references to “black hats” and “white hats” throughout the series, there is little absolute evil or righteousness amongst the various people and creatures portrayed. Whenever we anticipate certain behaviors, we are frequently wrong, giving lie to the “lie” inherent in reductive nature of characterization in the first place.

Buffy herself on many points follows a journey consistent with Joseph Campbell’s hero cycle, a true “white hat” on first analysis. *Buffy* scholar Rhonda Wilcox points out that Buffy, like Harry Potter, is “in some ways [the] traditional magical [hero]; neither, however, represents simple Freudian wish-fulfillment” (78). Moreover, Buffy also has her trickster-like moments. First and foremost, she lives in a state of perpetual identity crisis. From her first day at Sunnydale High School, when she toys with the possibility of becoming friends with popular girl Cordelia, to her desire to recapture her glory days as a cheerleader and the May Queen, Buffy is perpetually reluctant at times to fully embrace her “calling” as the “Chosen One.” Wilcox identifies the “disruptions caused by the magical world” in which Buffy lives as the source of her inability to achieve “normal” teenager-hood, as is the case with such similar hero characters as Potter (68). And yet the demands of this heroic imperative are foiled not only by Buffy’s sense of independence, but also her sense of humor. Wilcox points out an exchange when

Buffy has a chance to go to Northwestern University. Wesley – another watcher – insists her role as Slayer forbids her to leave, but she protests, “Yeah, I’m also a person. You can’t just define me by my Slayerness. That’s – something-ism! (“Choices” 3.19).

Buffy also has the unique privilege of being able to engage in the game Lewis Hyde refers to as “the dozens” or “trope a dope.” This is combative word-play used by tricksters to outwit those with potentially greater physical strength by “stupefying with swift circles of signifying” (273). As Hyde further elucidates, “The point of the game is to play with language, not to take it seriously, or better, to stay in balance between the playful and the serious while trying to tip one’s opponent off that balance, dizzied with a whirl of words” (272). Buffy most often uses this skill when combating anonymous vamps, with such quips as, “We haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Buffy and you’re history,” or, “You eat this late [...] you’re going to get heartburn” (“Never Kill a Boy” 1.5, “Wild at Heart” 4.6). When Buffy is absent at the start of Season Three, Willow tries to imitate her wittiness by telling a vamp, “Come and get it, Big Boy!” When Xander objects, Willow tries to justify her joke, but he just bemoans, “I’ve always been amazed with how Buffy fought but... in a way, I feel like we took her punning for granted” (“Anne” 3.1). Willow is clearly not in the same linguistic league as Buffy in this game, but she – like Xander and Giles – has other trickster moments.

The Shaman, the Linguist, and the Clown

All three members of the Scooby core take a turn at exhibiting trickster traits.

The characteristics that most correlate to how each might be perceived as such are well-

expressed in the episode “Primeval,” in which the three friends must combine their essences with Buffy’s to defeat the villain Adam. During the spell, Willow distributes three tarot-like cards that identify Willow as “Spirit,” Giles as “Mind,” and Xander as “Heart” (4.21). If we identify Spirit with the magical, Mind with intelligence and Heart with laughter, we can easily compare Buffy’s support system to those aspects of the trickster manifest as the Shaman, the Linguist and the Clown.

As indicated previously, Willow undergoes many transmutations, from timid brainy girl to powerful witch, from having a crush on Xander to discovering her own homosexuality. But one of the most dramatic metamorphoses takes place when the aforementioned Dark Willow – from the alternative universe created in the episode “The Wish” – arrives in Sunnydale. As a result of this crossover between dimensions, Willow’s doppelganger brings with her an image not only of Willow’s variability, but of the very plasticity of the “reality” in which they all dwell. We know after her visit that there is not only a leaky Hellmouth to contend with, but an infinite number of possible aspects of any person or situation the Scoobies may encounter, including, according to the dimension-traversing character Anya, “A world without shrimp. Or with, you know, nothing but shrimp” (“Superstar” 4.17).¹¹ Although this first glimpse of alternate realities is Anya’s doing, Willow’s magic repeatedly creates an irreducible liminality as she

¹¹ The character Anya is another individual who is indicative on some levels of tricksterly behavior, but her extreme literality might be more indicative of the African trickster Ananse’s nemesis, “Hate-to-be-contradicted” (Hynes 133). Inasmuch as she is situated in particular contrast with Xander’s buffoon-like tendencies, this seems likely to be her purpose. So for space reasons, despite the fact that I’m quite smitten with Anya and her ability to be the quintessential straight man, for now I must allow her to “take [her] furs and [her] literal interpretations to the other side of the river” (“Selfless” 7.5).

struggles with the potentially endless possibilities that her power engenders. That power will continue shifting between good and evil till the end of the series.

Xander also encounters his double in “The Replacement,”¹² but that which identifies him most clearly with trickster traditions is his knack for being a buffoon. Tricksters are sometimes identified with “medieval fools, [...] cosmic absurdity [...] the psychosocial value of playing around” (Pelton 122). Xander is frequently given the throw away laugh lines in many episodes, but they are so inextricably contextualized that it’s difficult to find a specific example without a great deal of explanation. His jokes are threaded finely throughout the warp and weave of the text. Inasmuch as the humor he possesses is childlike and vulnerable, Wilcox points out, “When we laugh at Xander, we are laughing together at ourselves” (145). Laughter, Mel Brooks explains, is a “protest scream against death” that enables us to keep moving forward even when we are surrounded by horrors (qtd. in Wilcox 129). Xander in many instances embodies this, often when nobody else is smiling.

Speaking of serious people, even the paragon-of-propriety Giles has his “ambiguous and anomalous” moments, usually facilitated by his shadow counterpart, Ethan Rayne (Hynes 34). While I have identified him as a linguist and intellectual straight man, and he certainly plays that role more than once, his interactions with Rayne give him a multi-dimensionality beyond that of knowledge guide or translator. In “A New Man,” the usually tweed-wearing, circumspect Giles is tricked by his old “friend” and foiled into going on a drinking binge following several depressing reminders of

¹² See note in Chapter 3 about the demon Toth.

Giles' state of being "between projects" during Season Four. Concurrent with Rayne's earlier cameos, Giles' past has been revealed to be a great deal more complex than meets the eye, including a dark secret history of meddling with black magic which once had lethal consequences ("The Dark Age" 2.8). Another of Rayne's appearances coincided with the selling of candy bars which regressed all of Sunnydale's adults – including Giles – to their teenage selves. Per Buffy, Giles at sixteen is "Less Together Guy, more Bad-Magic-Hates-The-World-Ticking-Time-Bomb Guy," and he and Buffy's mom, Joyce, go out to "tear things up a bit." But when confronted by Ethan's machinations, Giles is as capable as ever of asserting his sense of righteousness ("Band Candy" 3.6).

Yet "A New Man" is distinct from the other two episodes in that its plot reveals the possibility for total transformation within Giles, after a spiked drink results in Giles awaking the next day as a demon. Later, when he encounters Spike -- who encourages him to give in to his demon-ness -- Giles asserts, "I refuse to become a monster because I look like a monster. I have a soul. I have a conscience. I am a human being. Oh, stop the car!" This last command to Spike is because he spots Professor Walsh, who has recently insulted him and it is the sight of her that inspires him to embrace his hideous façade, at least for the time being. He also asserts that Rayne needs a "good being killed," which is more aggressive than what we've come to expect from him. Nevertheless, I must point out significantly that, even as a demon, teenage boy, or practitioner of dark magic, Giles is still capable of being a linguist. Even when he can only speak Fyarl, a demon language, he is apparently still capable of comprehending those who speak English to him (4.12).

We can continue to identify Buffy's word play, Willow's magic, Xander's clowning and Giles' transformations, not to mention a host of other characters, in trickster terms. But to more fully understand tricksters, we need to focus on a particular character whose journey throughout the series most evokes the journey captured in various trickster narratives: the vampire Spike.

Why Spike Matters

As I observed, while the Season One villain – the Master – was necessarily a touchstone to the old school of vampiric representation, even he had his humorous moments. Likewise, Darla – though clearly identified as an evil player in Season One– is deceptively innocent-looking.¹³ Furthermore, Angel gives us our first complex taste of moral ambiguity amongst the vampire set within the series. Still, while the vast majority of vampires Buffy encounters the first few seasons are little more than extras, passing through, getting staked, and dying like red-shirts on *Star Trek*, there is one other important exception. During Season Two we are introduced to a character who, more than any other in the series, manifests the traits of the trickster again and again. In fact, he may more fully express the entire range of trickster experience than many of his pop culture contemporaries, like Bart Simpson or Bugs Bunny, in part by being a bit more human than expected.

¹³ It is important to note that Darla's character is further expanded in the crossover series *Angel*, in which we are able to develop empathy for her when we learn that she was a prostitute dying of syphilis when the Master turns her into a vampire ("Darla" 2.4).

Spike as Situation Invertor/Survivor

When Spike first arrives in Season Two, he knocks down the sign which reads “Welcome to Sunnydale” and announces, ironically, “Home sweet home!” as he takes a long draught off of a liquor bottle. We can tell right away that he is not what we have come to expect from *Buffy* vampires thus far. With short-cropped, bleached-blond hair, a black leather duster and motorcycle boots, Spike looks like “Rebel Yell” Billy Idol and speaks with a British accent, notably a less sophisticated one than Giles. Upon his arrival amongst the Master’s still-devoted disciples, now headed by child/vampire Collin, “the Anointed One,”¹⁴ they are preparing for the ritualistic feast of St. Vigeous, a vampire “holy day.”

Spike walks in when another vampire, trying to impress Collin with his knowledge and understanding of tradition, announces that on the night of St. Vigeous, “our power shall be at its peak. When I kill her [Buffy], it’ll be the greatest event since The Crucifixion and I should know. I was there.” Laughingly, Spike observes:

Oh, please! If every vampire who said he was at The Crucifixion was actually there, it would have been like Woodstock. [...] I was actually at Woodstock. That was a weird gig. I fed off a flowerperson and I spent the next six hours watchin' my hand move.

From the outset, Spike establishes himself as a “situation inverter” and a disruptor of the status quo (Hynes 37). He concludes the scene by asking, “So. Who do you kill for fun around here?” (“School Hard” 2.3).

¹⁴ “Anointed One” is a curious corollary to Buffy’s moniker, “Chosen One,” both of which have messianic implications.

Originally situated to be the “Big Bad” of Season Two, Spike comes on the scene as a more hip, progressive, and unpredictable vampire than his predecessors. While killing Collin – whom Spike refers to as “The Annoying One” – Spike announces at the end of the episode, “From now on, we’re going to have a little *less* ritual and a little *more* fun” [emphasis mine]. But in the interim, he shows us that there is already going to be a great deal more to his character than simple blood-sucking danger. From his debut in this episode to the series finale, “Chosen,” Spike will prove himself to be the “consummate survivor” again and again (Hyde 43).

Furthermore, Spike’s sexual exploits, a feature of any trickster character, are implied from the outset when he provocatively licks blood from Drusilla, the vampire who is both his lover and creator, a familiar mixture of roles which again evokes a breaching of taboos, another trickster trait (Hynes 43). Having brought Dru along, he sets himself apart as something other than a “lone wolf” hunter when we see him showing uncharacteristic tenderness towards her as a result of her illness.¹⁵ Their bond is observed in a later episode, “Surprise,” by The Judge¹⁶, an archaic rock-like demon who burns the humanity out of his victims. He tells them, “You two stink of humanity. You share affection and jealousy” (“Surprise” 2.13). But Spike is quick to remind him that they are the ones responsible for bringing him back to life, thus eluding a potentially deadly confrontation, one of many traps he will escape.

¹⁵ We learn in a later episode that Dru is recovering from having been nearly killed by a mob in Prague.

¹⁶ Dr. Michael Sexson pointed out to me the correlation between this character and the antagonist in Cormack McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden, yet another example of intertextuality gone wild.

We also learn in Spike's debut episode that Angel has a history with him, although we are not told its exact nature right away. When Giles observes that Spike's name is a "little unorthodox" in vampire nomenclature, questions arise amongst the Scooby Gang regarding whether being unorthodox could possibly make him any worse than any other vampire. Angel unequivocally asserts, "He's worse. Once he starts something, he doesn't stop until everything in his path is dead" ("School Hard" 2.3). This penchant for persistence will mark Spike's behavior repeatedly, and references both a trickster's survival instinct and his plasticity.

Giles also reveals that Spike has previously killed two other slayers. As a trickster with little concern for propriety, Spike is eager to make Buffy his third. His disregard for tradition and his willingness to charge in have apparently served him well in the past, but on this occasion, Spike ends up getting caught in his own "trap of appetite," as Lewis Hyde calls it (15). He should have "used his head," as he tells another vamp while smashing his skull into a fire emergency case containing an ax. But he is a creature of impulse. When he confronts Buffy, he admits, "What can I say? I couldn't wait" ("School Hard" 2.3).

He arrives in the midst of a parent-teacher night which Buffy has been forced to host by the mean-spirited Principal Snyder. While Buffy and the others barricade themselves in classrooms in an attempt to defend themselves against the onslaught of vampires, Xander goes to get Angel's help. When they return, Angel pretends¹⁷ to threaten Xander to lure Spike out. "Haven't seen you in the killing fields in ages!"

¹⁷ Or is he pretending? Later episodes call Angel's motives here into question.

Spike observes and asks for the other vampire's assessment of the Slayer. Angel tells him that he's given her the "puppy dog 'I'm all tortured' act" to keep her off his back while he feeds. We know that Angel, himself, has a history of being a "master of the kind of creative deception" that can be perceived as an art form (Hyde 17). Spike laughingly calls it the "Anne Rice routine," and for a moment the audience is less certain about Angel than ever ("School Hard" 2.3). Who is tricking whom here?

But Spike calls Angel's bluff by offering to feed together on Xander. At the last moment, he unexpectedly smashes Angel in the face, protesting, "You think you can fool me? You were my sire, man! You were my... Yoda!" As we already suspect and later learn more about, Drusilla actually created Spike, but it was Angel who created her, so grand-sire might be a more apt term.¹⁸ But Spike doesn't parse the details; enraged, he calls Angel an "Uncle Tom" and carries on with his destructive rampage until stopped by – of all people – Buffy's mom, Joyce, who now wields the ax. After the battle, he bemoans to Dru, "A slayer with family and friends. That sure as hell wasn't in the brochure" ("School Hard" 2.3).

The trickster has been drawn into a world as full of anomalies as he is himself. Yet, before the episode is over, he reasserts his rebellious nature. When another vampire insists that he should show remorse and do penance for his impetuosity, Spike at first seems contrite. "I was rash," he admits, "and if I had to do it all over

¹⁸ It is only in the spin-off series *Angel* that we learn how, even though Drusilla was the one who exchanged blood with Spike to make him a vampire, Angel was the one who really taught him to be a cruel, sadistic killer. Also, if Spike is a corollary for Luke in the *Star Wars* vernacular, that would make Drusilla Obi-Wan Kenobi and so Angel could be either Yoda or Quai-Gog Jin, both masters to the young Obi-Wan.

again... Who am I kidding? I would do it exactly the same, only I'd do this first" ("School Hard" 2.3). And thus endeth Collin, with a clanking of chains as Spike hauls him in a cage directly into a beam of sunlight.

Spike's knack for inverting situations is not limited to his own impulses, however. During the course of Season Two, he is often the one caught in the inversion, "trapped in [his] own defense" (Hyde 45). When he tries to save Dru by kidnapping Angel for a healing ritual, he is inexplicably foiled in his miscommunication with the double-dealing Willy the Snitch. Willy brings Buffy (and co-slayer Kendra¹⁹) to the ritual while Spike is in the midst of the finishing touches. While here playing the role of shaman, a role sometimes associated with and sometimes divergent from that of trickster, he cannot do it with absolute seriousness (Ricketts 87). Stacey Abbott, another Buffy scholar, observes that for Spike, the ritual is as much science as magic and he maintains a "secular cynicism" when he adds his own punchline to the ceremony, "Bring to a simmering boil and remove to a low flame" (par. 26).

But neither his humor nor his cynicism protect him from Buffy's rage at the abduction of her lover and she wins the day by bringing the church crashing down around him in flames. Spike's survival in this scenario is ironically facilitated by the now-healed Drusilla, whose own inverted situation places her in the position of

¹⁹ In another twist that bucks expectations, Kendra is "called" as a slayer when Buffy dies briefly at the end of Season One and is brought back by Xander's knowledge of CPR ("Prophecy Girl" 1.12).

caretaker to the soon-to-be wheelchair-bound Spike, the two of them together “harnessing dissolution to rebirth” (Pelton 129).

Not until the end of Season Two is Spike again capable of inverting any situation. He spends several episodes at his own simmering boil over the low flame of frustration while watching Angel – who has turned evil – gets friendly with Drusilla. In “trope-a-dope” fashion, Angel taunts him with such jabs as “sit and spin” and “roller boy” (“Passion” 2.17). Like any self-respecting trickster, Spike is not content to remain caught in the trap of his own disability. He keeps his recovery hidden from Dru and Angel, then while they are out preparing for the destructive awakening of the demon Acatla, he escapes to create another twist of his own.

He surprises Buffy by saving her from a showdown with a police officer, who is trying to arrest her following Kendra’s death. Buffy is naturally suspicious of Spike’s motives. When she asks him what he wants, Spike tells her, “I want to stop Angel. (sarcastic) I want to save the world.” Buffy asks if he remembers he’s a vampire, to which Spike responds:

We like to talk big, vampires do. “I’m going to destroy the world.” That’s just tough guy talk. Strutting around with your friends over a pint of blood. The truth is, I like this world. You’ve got dog racing, Manchester United... and you’ve got people. Billions of people walking around like Happy Meals with legs. It’s all right here. But then someone comes along with a vision. With a real... passion for destruction. Angel could pull it off. Goodbye, Picadilly. Farewell, Leicester bloody Square. You know what I’m saying. (“Becoming Part I” 2.21)

Buffy is still not taken in and becomes quickly cognizant of the fact that Spike is really ready to betray Angel due to his possessiveness over Dru and his desire to

wreak vengeance on Angel. Like other tricksters, Spike at this point is genuinely less concerned with being a hero than with satisfying his own desires.

The conflict between Spike and Angel also highlights the difference between trickster characters and truly evil characters in other mythologies. Tricksters are not blatantly destructive, although sometimes destruction occurs in their wake. They are about “opportunistic craft” in finding the path of least resistance (Doty 46). The contrast is exemplified in the scene in which Angel is trying to torture Giles for information about how to awaken Acatla. Spike stops him and Angel asks, “Since when did you become so levelheaded?” Spike replies, “Right about the time you became so pig-headed. You have your way with him, you’ll never get to destroy the world. And I don’t fancy spending the next month trying to get librarian out of the carpet. There are other ways” (“Becoming Part II” 2.22).

Yet only at the end of the season do we fully comprehend how far Spike’s sense of utilitarian survival will take him. As Buffy and Angel engage in their final battle, Buffy is at one point disarmed and apparently helpless. Spike, on the way out the door with the unconscious Drusilla, peeks in and – in dismay – says, “God, he’s gonna kill her!” (“Becoming Part II” 2.22). Then, after watching for a moment, he shrugs, turns and walks away. He has turned the tables once again.

Spike as Clown/Buffoon

We are permitted a glimpse of Spike’s future role in Season Four when he makes a cameo appearance in Season Three. His character was so enchanting in

Season Two that fans clamored for an encore. While Season Three is rich with twisty characters – the new slayer Faith, Buffy’s dark shadow; the seemingly upstanding Mayor who happens to be immortal and (eventually) demonic; the street-smart, wise-cracking Mr. Trick, who is ironically not very trickster-like at all – Spike alone provides us with one of the funniest lines of not only this season, but the entire series, exemplifying the “unexpected sally” to which Hyde refers (131).

In a surprise return to Sunnydale, which he promised Buffy would not occur, Spike again knocks down the “Welcome” sign and falls out of the car, clearly drunk. He makes a lot of noise about getting even with Angel, but is too snockered to do anything about it. It becomes clear through his ramblings that Drusilla has left him and he blames Angel for the diminution of her affections. Angel has, by this time, regained his soul and his place amongst the Scoobies. His and Buffy’s relationship is in uncertain territory.

Spike hobbles together a half-baked plot to have Willow do a spell on Angel, or maybe Dru, and then seeks out the Slayer, who has a necessary spellbook. Having kidnapped Willow and Xander, Spike gets Buffy and Angel to accompany him to the Magic Shop for ingredients under threat of not revealing their whereabouts. Observing their tense chemistry, Spike mocks their supposed state of friendship. “The last time I looked in on you two,” he observes, “you were fighting to the death. Now you’re back making googly-eyes at each other like nothing happened. Makes me want to heave.” When Buffy and Angel insist they’re just friends, Spike rails, “You’ll never be friends. Love isn’t brains, children, it’s blood... blood screaming inside you to work its will.” He

then emotionally “unclothes [himself] without being ashamed” by saying, “I may be love's bitch, but at least I'm man enough to admit it” (Hyde 284, “Lovers Walk” 3.8)

A battle ensues shortly thereafter, involving Spike’s former lackeys, who were apparently less than pleased with his betrayal and desertion. Following the carnage, Spike seems to regain his equilibrium and in a humorous twist simply tells Buffy and Angel where to find their friends. He then admits, “I've been all wrongheaded about this. Weeping, crawling, blaming everybody else.” His solution is what we expect from a trickster. “I'll find her, wherever she is, tie her up and torture her until she likes me again.[...] Love's a funny thing. (“Lovers Walk 3.8)

When Spike is involved, love does indeed turn out to be funny in every sense of the word. In the passage of time, he will add to the humor a great deal of pathos, but for a while he remains the comic. After breaking up with Drusilla again, he returns in Season Four to take up a relationship with popular-girl-turned-vampire Harmony that is obviously based purely on sex (“The Harsh Light of Day” 4.3). He gets “neutered” shortly thereafter by means of an Initiative behavior-modification chip placed in his brain and needs to throw himself at the mercy of the Slayer and her friends to survive. While he is “less ridden by lust and hunger now that his organs of appetite have been whittled away,” Hyde observes that such a benefit to the trickster condition is usually accidental (31). Instead, as the “wacky neighbor,” whose job it is to drop in on the Scoobies and say, “Can I borrow a cup of sugar and insult you?” Spike explores the limits of comedic trickery (“S5 Overview” 5.6).

Having been “long established in the Buffyverse as the teller of uncomfortable truths,” Spike is now perfectly situated to mock the Scoobies at every turn (Rowan). In the episode “Pangs,” Spike not only takes on Buffy’s retinue, but the very concept of political correctness. The episode involves a spirit being, Hus, who has come to avenge the wrongs committed against the Chumash people. While Willow and Giles engage in an ongoing, heated debate about how to properly deal with the dilemma posed by the inability to recompense Native Americans for past wrongs, Spike cuts through the rhetoric in typical trickster disruptive fashion, by shouting, “Oh, someone put a stake in me!” Despite Xander’s volunteering to oblige, Spike continues:

I just can't take all this mamby-pamby boo-hooing about the bloody Indians. [...] You won. All right? [...] That's what conquering nations do. It's what Ceasar did and he's not going around saying, "I came, I conquered, I felt really bad about it" (“Pangs” 4.8)

When Willow especially persists in her desire to make amends, Spike further observes, “You exterminated his race. What could you possibly say that would make him feel better? It's kill or be killed here. Take your bloody pick.” Xander, who has been infected with various diseases by Hus, adds, “Maybe it's the syphilis talking but... some of that made sense” (“Pangs” 4.8).

Later, after a protracted battle with Hus and his cohort, Spike becomes riddled with arrows, all of which miraculously miss his heart.²⁰ Ever determined to survive, he is quick to recant his earlier position, calling out, “Remember that conquering nation thing?

²⁰ A stake through the heart is the most common cause of death for vampires in the Whedonverse, although they are also susceptible to fire, direct sunlight and decapitation.

Forget it. Apologize.” This contrasts starkly with Willow’s actions during the skirmish. She confesses, “Two seconds of conflict with an indigenous person and I turned into General Custer.” Giles attempts to absolve her by noting, “Violence does that. Instinct takes over.” Spike adds, “Yeah, that’s the fun” (“Pangs” 4.8).

Despite Spike’s invectives, he repeatedly is reminded of his enforced handicap throughout this season, having been once again “snared in his own [device]” (Hyde 19). As he explains to the Scoobies in “Pangs,” his “little trip to the vet” means he “doesn’t chase the other puppies anymore. I can’t bite anything. I can’t even hit people” (4.8). Yet his physical patheticness is offset by his continued ability to engage in verbal jabs. In his own variation on “The Dozens,” Spike takes advantage of whatever “naturally occurring opportunities” he can to insult Buffy and her friends (Hyde 47).

At one point, the dark slayer Faith²¹ awakens from the coma she fell into following a showdown with Buffy in Season Three. Giles and Xander are searching for her when they encounter Spike. After they describe Faith, who he’s never seen before, Spike tells them he’ll “head out, find this girl, tell her exactly where you are and then watch as she kills you. (off their look) Can’t any one of your damn little Scooby Club²² at least try to remember that I hate you all?” (“This Year’s Girl” 4.15) This comment shows how Spike is not just about opportunism, but about “blocking opportunities” such as the possibility of true friendship with Buffy and her allies (Hyde 47).

²¹ Faith is “called” when Kendra dies (“Faith, Hope and Trick” 3.3).

²² Note Spike’s deliberate failure to refer to them as the Scooby Gang, or even the Scoobies.

Time after time, Spike will resist sentimentalization, despite his handicap. In another instance, Buffy and Riley are trapped in a haunted house by the spirits of some sexually repressed teenagers. Xander, desiring to save them, rallies, “We’re fresh out of superpeople and somebody’s gotta go back in there. (beat) Now who’s with me?” When Willow and her girlfriend Tara hesitate, Spike chimes in, “I am.” The others look at him in surprise, but he explains, “I know I’m not the first choice for heroics and Buffy’s tried to kill me more than once. And I don’t fancy a single one of you at all. But... (beat) Actually, all that sounds pretty convincing.” He abruptly walks away, mumbling to himself, “I wonder if *Danger Mouse* is on”²³ (“Where the Wild Things Are” 4.18).

Eventually, Spike begins to chafe at his dependence on the Scoobies. He moves out of Xander’s basement,²⁴ where he has been staying, and keeps himself in pig’s blood and cigarettes by scaring people into giving him money.²⁵ He even makes Giles pay him for helping out with the older man’s demonic transformation. But the usually energetic Spike is unsettled, even after he discovers he can hit other demons and is anxious to be rid of the brain implant that hobbles him. When he first encounters Adam, he is ripe for involvement in some sort of plot or intrigue a worthy trickster occupation. Adam appeals to this.

²³ Spike is, notably, an avid television watcher.

²⁴ When Spike steals Xander’s radio at one point, Xander protests, “That’s my radio!” Spike blandly responds, “And you’re what, shocked and disappointed? I’m evil!” (“A New Man” 4.12).

²⁵ Once, when he tries this trick on the ultra-literal Anya, she observes, “You made me yell really high.” Of course, she is not truly scared by him, because he’s “not even bumpy anymore,” referring to the tell-tale wrinkles vampires get on their foreheads when they are about to feed (“Where the Wild Things Are” 4.15).

The cyber/demon/human construct expresses empathy for Spike's dilemma and describes its effect on him eloquently:

You feel smothered. Trapped like an animal. Pure in its ferocity, unable to actualize the urges within, clinging to one truth like a flame struggling to burn within an enclosed glass. That a beast this powerful cannot be contained. Inevitably it will break free and savage the land again. I will make you whole again. Make you savage.

Spike is deeply moved by Adam's sophistry. He tells him, "Wow. I mean, yeah. I get why the demons all fall in line with you. You're like Tony Robbins. If he was a big, scary Frankenstein-looking-- (reconsiders) You're exactly like Tony Robbins" ("Yoko Factor" 4.20).

Spike agrees to aid Adam in separating Buffy from her friends in order to make her vulnerable to the creature's machinations. However, still playing the fool in this season, Spike once again outwits himself. A part of the plan is to provide Buffy with the plans for the Initiative's internal operations, but the plans end up being in Willow's possession. When Adam asks if Willow is one of the friends Spike has separated from Buffy, Spike responds cheerfully, "Damn right I did. You should've seen 'em. They won't be talking to each other for a long, long-- (realizes) Hang on. I think I might have detected a small flaw."

Adam asserts, "So you failed."

Spike is quick to backpedal. "Hey, you're supposed to be so smart. You let me plan this thing." At this point, Spike is "stupider than the animals" of which Adam is made (Hyde 43). When Adam only stares at him, Spike says, "Okay, let's not quibble

about who failed who. The important thing is making sure the Slayer is where we want.” He makes a hasty retreat, however, when Adam orders him to leave. He may be a clown, but he’s not a stupid one.

By the end of the episode and the season, Spike has realized that – as with Angel – Adam’s penchant for all-out destruction is not the key to ultimate survival. As Hyde explains, tricksters such as coyotes are survivors because of their adaptability. Unlike gray wolves, whose inability to “abandon the pack organization” made them “vulnerable to man,” coyotes will do what it takes to survive, whatever way they can (44). Once Spike sees that Adam has turned on him and is headed for defeat, he once again latches on to the potential for survival that association with the Scoobies represents. At the last minute, he prevents a demon from interrupting the merging spell Willow, Xander and Giles are performing to defeat Adam.

Rather proud of himself, Spike points out the demon he has killed to save them. “Nasty sort of fellow. Lucky for you blighters I was here, eh?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Giles acknowledges, “Although your heroism is slightly muted by the fact that you were helping Adam to start a war that would kill us all.” When Spike’s smile disappears, Xander observes, “You probably just saved us so we wouldn’t stake you right here.”

Spike asks, “Well, yeah. (a beat) Did it work?” (“Primeval” 4.21).

Spike as Psychopomp/Savior

Spike's survival allows him to move on to the next stage in his trickster development. His subsequent infatuation/obsession with Buffy throughout Season Five causes him to play the part of "courtly lover" at times, while Buffy repeatedly expresses her aversion to him (Spah). Time and again, she tells him he's "disgusting," or a "pig." It seems his "love" for her will remain unrequited indefinitely. Yet, ever surprising the viewer/reader, the characterization of Spike in Buffy takes a significant turn in Season Six. After Buffy is resurrected following her death at the end of Season Five, she finds that the only person she can relate to is Spike. She realizes that he is her "counterpart," that his experience is "closer to her[s] than any of the other characters" and that he knows what it is like to feel like you don't fit in anymore ("Season Six Overview" 6.6). The resultant sexual relationship is still largely a matter of lust and power play, but Spike has clearly moved to a place beyond pure appetite (Hyde 62).

The eventual outcome of Spike's surrender to "fate" in Season Seven, like Buffy's death in Season Five, evokes the principle of self-sacrifice which "goes fairly deep into several mythologies" ("Season Six Overview" 6.6). Hyde equates sacrifice with the trickster on several points, despite its more common associations with the hero archetype. From Hermes to Eshu and beyond, the ways that trickster sacrifice has benefited humanity, often unintentionally, indicates a "reshaping," a "reallotment" which promises "the chance that the links between things on earth and things in heaven may be loosened" (Hyde 257). Buffy and Spike each have their turn at unhinging the door between life and death, but at the end of the series, it is Spike's willingness to stay and

“see how it ends” which allows Buffy to escape and join her friends and family once more (“Chosen” 7.22).

The fact of Spike’s consummate survival, in spite of numerous opportunities for his demise, has facilitated the survival of everyone else.²⁶ We might assume that his story ends there, but the spin-off series *Angel* provides a venue for Spike’s resurrection as well (“Conviction” 5.1). While I wish to restrict my points to the parameters of *Buffy* specifically, I must point out that the trickster persona which Spike represents is as irreducible as any other aspect of the text and is inclined to reassert itself in some new and unanticipated way at every turn.²⁷ But this is just one more element of why *Buffy* is well-situated to explore the way that tricksters facilitate both the learning processes and the disruptive narratives which are generative of both comprehension and change.

²⁶ Spike’s end role in the series might well be compared to Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*; however, an in-depth look at that is a task for another day.

²⁷ There is also a series of young adult fiction books, not to mention a host of fanfic (unofficial fan-produced stories) which carry Spike’s story to a number of places I can’t explore here.

“THINGS FALL APART; THEY FALL APART SO HARD.”

BUFFY, CHAOS, AND THE COALESCENCE OF MEANING

Master [as a manifestation of The First]: It's not about right. Not about wrong. Spike looks up as the Master disappears. In his place stands Buffy, a hard and cold look in her eye.

Buffy: It's about power. (“Lessons” 7.1)

In this scene, a possibly/probably insane Spike seems to be hallucinating the embodiment of The First, a shape-shifting entity that purports to be the source of all Evil in the Buffyverse. Spike has just returned from his trip to the underworld to unwittingly/intentionally regain his soul in order to give Buffy “what she deserves” (“Grave” 6.22). In his fragmented condition, Spike is well-primed to accept the understanding that binary oppositions such as right and wrong have lost their relevance. But The First, being a Derrida-confounding insistence of the concept of originary presence, asserts an absolutist agenda. It's about power.

So what constitutes power in a post-colonial, post-modern world? Can it be established amidst so much uncertainty? All this talk of tricksters and deconstruction and post-modern sensibilities can seem very chaotic, at least as that word is used in common parlance. The idea of chaos certainly comes up in *Buffy* a great deal as something to be combated. Despite Lewis Hyde's assertion that the “chaotic everything” is the “plenitude otherwise hidden behind conventional form,” chaos theory itself, like both deconstruction and post-modernism, has often been associated with nihilism (295). The very problematic nature of the term “chaos,” rich in history and deeply imbedded in both humanistic and scientific modes of critical inquiry, is itself so complex that it has nearly

robbed itself of any significance whatsoever. As a professor of both English and Chemistry, N. Katherine Hayles is well-situated to observe that “chaos” has been “so thoroughly deprofessionalized that its use is regarded as a signal that one is in the presence of a dilettante rather than an expert” (2).

Nevertheless, like Hayles, I choose to focus on it “precisely because of the ambiguous meanings that inhere within it.” As she points out, the term “serves as a crossroads, a juncture where various strata and trends within the culture come together” (Hayles 2). This crossroads is the meeting place of hard science, social science, and the humanities, all of which have had a vested interest in trying to comprehend “chaos” in its various incarnations, just as Spike tries to comprehend the manifestations of The First. And since Trickster is the “God of the Crossroads,” it would seem that we are once again in his territory (Hyde 108).

In order to grasp what scientific inquiry has to say about chaos, we must first understand one of the principle tenets of it. In accordance with traditional Western conceptualization of chaos as the binary opposite of order, Hayles explains that Lord Kelvin’s second law of thermodynamics – the idea that in a closed system, entropy always tends to increase – was perceived as a given. This “universal tendency toward dissipation” translated to a belief that all that we knew was slated for inevitable destruction (Hayles 13). In more recent years, such great minds as Mitchell Feigenbaum (“Universal Behavior”), Benoit Mandelbrot (*Fractal Geometry*), James Gleick (*Chaos: Making a New Science*), and Ilya Prigogine (*Self-Organization and Order Out of Chaos*)

have argued against this traditional view, asserting instead that “the universe has a capacity to renew itself” (Hayles 12-13).

Hayles further describes how this research has given rise to the variations on the concept of chaos that evolved into such terms as *self-organization*, *emergence*, and *complexity* or *complex dynamics*. All of these terms reflect the sensibility that seemingly chaotic systems, or at least non-linear tendencies within systems, are not necessarily destructive in nature, as such. Rather, whatever dissipation may transpire will result in new systems of a different nature altogether, often unanticipated. Basically, this translates to a questioning of how “complexity seems spontaneously to come into existence” and a supposition that there is a “constructive role that entropic disorder plays in creating order” (Hayles 12,13). Again, we are reminded of the role of tricksters in creating art from dirt. If dirt is, as Lewis Hyde calls it, “matter out of place,” or what is “excluded when we try to create order,” then that exclusion “speaks to the sterility that hides in most all human systems and design” (179). We try to force orderliness on a naturally self-ordered world, and are better off understanding that chaos is not the enemy, but the “progenitor of the universe, order’s precursor and partner rather than its antagonist” (Hayles 14). From this standpoint, chaos seems a powerful force to be reckoned with.

But chaos as a concept is only an abstraction without examples, according to science and literature professor Kenneth J. Knoespel. He asserts that “the relation between deconstruction and chaos theory [...] can most profitably be pursued by considering the way these theories deal with local narratives” (113). Derrida’s

observations, much like Mandelbrot's, are founded on "the crucial importance not of axiomatic or systematic statements but of examples" (115). Rather than being merely "canned" paradigms "placed in containers and ready to use as prescribed," the kinds of examples in which both these theorists engage are "phenomenologically rich sources, a means not only of simple affirmation but also of extended inquiry," inviting the possibility of "pedagogical play" (114-5). *Buffy* represents a such a viably rich paradigmatic resource for exploring the parameters of chaos theory, as well as deconstruction.

In the Whedonverse, however, chaos is initially represented as undesirable. Kelvin's Second Law even comes up indirectly when Giles is helping Buffy with her SAT practice test, in which a correct answer is, "C) All systems tend toward chaos" ("Band Candy" 3.6). In addition to being associated with the destructive influences which constantly threaten Buffy and her friends with every apocalypse, the term is even given an unattractive and peculiar embodiment in the guise of a "chaos demon." This creature is credited with being the force that disrupts Spike's and Drusilla's long-standing relationship, when Drusilla has an affair with one. After Spike's return to Sunnydale in Season Three, he relates the details of the break-up to Willow. "Have you ever seen a chaos demon?" he laments. "They're all slime and antlers!" ("Lovers Walk" 3.8).

The vivid earthiness of this description yields up images of the natural world and its claim on what we mistake for the order of our artificial lives. While the dissolution of the relationship between Spike and Dru seems initially destructive, it results in the outgrowth of Spike's role within the Buffyverse as it then evolves. This is tantamount to

what literature and science professor David Porush describes as the macroscopic world “always in process” as a result of microscopic variations. As he illustrates, Spike’s break-up is similar to a person forgetting his keys, a seemingly small event, which then results in “enormous consequences [such as – due to forgotten keys] so I missed the interview, lost the job, became poor, went crazy, assassinated a president, changed the course of history” (Porush 58).

But these micro-changes can be the result of either the natural world or the expression of free will, which is distinct in the Whedonverse from forced will as a source of power. While the Hell-God Glory, the villain of Season Five, asserts that “in torture, death, and chaos does my power lie,” we find that her entropic ambitions are thwarted by Buffy’s will (“Weight of the World” 5.21). As a self-sacrificing trickster/hero, Buffy also outmaneuvers the fearful and patriarchal hegemonic predictions of the Knights of Byzantium, who assert that “order will be overthrown and the universe will tumble into chaos” unless Buffy’s sister, Dawn, dies (“Spiral” 5.20). Buffy establishes equilibrium in a dynamically unstable environment, not through might, but by outwitting the system which requires Dawn’s blood, which is the same as hers. This is a manifestation of how “time and freedom, rather than determinism, [...] play a fundamental role” in the emergence of new events, whether on a physical or metaphysical level (Prigogine qtd. in Porush 58).

According to Porush, such an occurrence highlights the fundamental contradiction within the concept of chaos as it relates to physics and the biological sciences. He compares the simple interaction among particles to “frictionless billiard balls,” which are

governed by physics' laws, with the macro world, which is "teeming with a variety and confusing array of complex, interwoven, hungry structures that grow, and grow more complicated, willy-nilly, feeding in an open exchange" (58-9). That these systems, which "behave in what seems like random or disordered fashion," could actually be described by such mathematic approaches as Mandelbrot's equation adds another level of complexity to the power dynamic mix. Every time we think we have a handle on the system, another layer of possibilities manifests itself.

Still, like Mandelbrot's fractals, the emergence of new structures is not easily identifiable from the source. Ethan Rayne, for example, who identifies himself specifically as chaos' "faithful, degenerate son," has the potential to tread a path akin to Spike's. Early on, he certainly bears the marks of the trickster in many ways, not the least of which are his disruptive influence and his sense of humor. But unlike Spike, Rayne actively cultivates – even worships – chaos. With such invocations as, "The world that denies thee, thou inhabit [...] The peace that ignores thee [...] thou corrupt," Rayne identifies with a sort of chaotic absolutism ("Halloween" 2.6). When he accuses Giles of "religious intolerance," albeit lightheartedly,²⁸ he ironically places himself in the role of judge. Either one of these departures from haphazard, utilitarian, go-with-the-flow tricksterism may represent the micro changes which resulted in his failure on the macro level to gain any real power ("A New Man" 4.12).

Katherine Hayles tells us that, according to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, small fluctuations on the microscale tend to cancel each other out, and are therefore of

²⁸ "Sad, that," he tells Giles. "I mean, just look at the Irish troubles."

little importance on the macroscale. By contrast, chaos theory represents a “suspicion of globalization.” By this, Hayles is referring not just to the capitalistic emphasis on that word, but to any sort of generalizing impetus. “In deconstruction,” she explains, “as in the science of chaos, iteration and recursion are seen as ways to destabilize systems and make them yield unexpected conclusions” (Hayles 11). Supposing that such destabilization is a power that can be controlled proves again and again to be a misapprehension amongst *Buffy* characters. One such character is Jonathan Levinson, a “nerd” who inhabits Buffy’s world in every season, but whose attempts at forced control result in instability.

In the episode “Superstar,” Jonathan casts a spell that alters reality to such a degree that he becomes the source of many forms of “goodness.” In this alternate universe, he is responsible for inventing the Internet, as well as having starred in *The Matrix*, graduating from medical school by the age of eighteen, becoming a professional basketball star, and acting as a tactical consultant (one of the “big guns”) for the Initiative. But the apparent totality of his greatness is suspicious, at least to Buffy, who observes, “He just seems too perfect.” Perfection is not a naturally viable state, and even Adam is quick to pick up on this. When a vampire minion asks the monster what he intends to do about the threat Jonathan poses, Adam tells him, “I don’t need to do anything. These magicks are unstable, corrosive. They will inevitably lead to chaos. And I am interested in chaos” (“Superstar” 4.17).

Notably, Adam does not identify either the magic or its corrosive effects as chaos, but points out that their disruptive effects will lead *to* chaos, a phenomenon which

intrigues him. Adam, as a very controlled construct himself, could be identified as an example of the dispassionate scientific mindset. He is “interested” in chaos, but disinterested in its origins, more invested in observing the results of the events already in motion. To the degree that he interferes with the natural unfolding of events, it is largely without an agenda of power structures. The power he acquires is predominantly experimental. Ironically, it is through Jonathan’s corrosive magic that the literal source of Adam’s power – his Uranium 235 core – is revealed by means of Jonathan’s Initiative consultancy. This proves to be Adam’s undoing in the end of Season Four (“Superstar” 4.17).

Another example of a character who attempts to wield chaos with disastrous results is Anya. In a conversation she has with D’Hoffryn, her former “boss,” Anya explains:

For a thousand years I wielded the powers of The Wish. I brought ruin to the heads of unfaithful men. I brought forth destruction and chaos for the pleasure of the lower beings. I was feared and worshipped across the mortal globe. (with disgust) And now I'm stuck at Sunnysdale High. Mortal. A child. And I'm flunking math. (“Dopplegangland” 3.16)

Although she attributes to herself chaotic power, Anya proves herself to be inept at handling the unexpected on many fronts, not the least of which is comprehending high school math. This proves to be a consistent problem for her, which comes most fully to fruition after Xander leaves her at the altar on their wedding day (“Hells Bells” 6.16). She resumes her vengeance powers to get even with Xander, yet she still desires a

complete reconciliation with him and cannot negotiate the murky possibilities between these options with ease.

Craving easy answers, she asks Xander if he still wants to get married, to which he replies, “An, it's a very complicated question.” Still stuck in the realm of binary oppositions, she insists, “It's kind of an either/or deal.” Vexed by his ambivalence, she turns to the rest of the Scoobies in the hope that they will invoke her vengeance powers, but they, too, are incapable of dealing in absolutes at this point. She gets especially frustrated by Willow and Tara, whom she assumes have a certain definitive take on the opposite sex. Thinking that, as lesbians, their “hating of men will come in handy,” she is truly exasperated by the fact that they don't hate them after all. “What kind of lesbians are you?” she asks. “If you love men so much, go love men!” (“Entropy” 6.18).

Not surprisingly, Anya's failure to force the issue is only circumvented by the arrival of Spike. Still unable to see beyond her desire for vengeance, Anya is moved to interact with him only when Halfrek, her fellow vengeance-demon friend, points out to her, “Now I know you have this whole female-power, take back the night thing... I think that's cute. But I've been telling you for decades, men need a little vengeance now and then, too.” Anya tries and tries to get Spike to wish some evil on Xander, but the slippery trickster never quite takes the bait. Instead, Anya is caught up in an emerging chemical reaction as the two spurned lovers find escape from their woes in each other's arms. Despite Spike's assurance that they are just “moving on,” this complex dynamic results in a greater degree of entropy between not only Anya and Xander, but also between Buffy

and her friends, when Spike at last reveals that she has been sleeping with him (“Entropy” 6.18).

By contrast, in the same episode, Tara and Willow – who were previously separated by Willow’s unchecked tendencies to use magic forcibly – experience a different type of emergence. Tara, surprising Willow in her room, makes a declaration about the nature of entropy. “Things fall apart,” she says. “They fall apart so hard. You can’t ever... put them back the way they were.” What Tara observes is as true of any natural phenomenon as it is of relationships. But the role of emergence in this case is facilitated once again by the exercise of free will. After Tara tells Willow the processes that they are expected to go through to achieve resolution, she questions, “Can we just skip it? Can you just be kissing me now?” (“Entropy” 6.18). The differentiation between Anya’s insistence and Tara’s questioning is what results in different outcomes. Nevertheless, both outcomes prove to be temporary occurrences in and of themselves. Although it takes an entire season, Anya and Xander do reconcile. In contrast, astounded viewers only have one episode in which to enjoy Willow’s and Tara’s reunion before the stray bullet from villain Warren Mear’s gun takes Tara’s life.

From thence arises my preference for the term *coalescence*. While emergence denotes the “science of becoming,”²⁹ which David Porush identifies with “complicated (nonlinear partial differential) mathematics, we can observe that, in living systems, these emergent occurrences are themselves temporary or transitory (60-1). Like fascinating

²⁹ Two of *Buffy*’s most critically acclaimed episodes are entitled, “Becoming: Part I” and “Becoming: Part II,” during which we are made privy to both Angel’s history and Buffy’s exceptional ability to balance personal desire and communal need (2.21, 2.22).

cloud-formations, or computer-generated fractal imagery, flocks of birds or schools of fish, these moments of congruency are there briefly and beautifully, coalescing before our eyes and then dissipating to create other instances of meaningfulness. Some last longer than others, but each instance or example is most often brought about by some “radical departure from the chain of causality, enabling a new beginning,” as described by critical theorist Eric Charles White. As was the case with Tara’s unexpected desire to “skip” the natural process of making up, coalescence is the result of what White calls “pockets of negentropy spontaneously appear[ing],” which – in the Buffyverse – is most often due to the exertion of free will (264, Rabb 5).

White brings us back to the trickster realm by identifying negentropy (or self-organization) as the “*bricolage* or savage that will point the way to a cultural renaissance” (265). Tara, who in every other way seems to be the antithesis of tricksterhood – sweet, kind, gentle – in applying the properties of free will to her otherwise naturalistic character, takes on the role of disruptor to create a moment of meaningfulness. This moment has ripple effects, for it is Willow’s renewed love and subsequent overwhelming grief which result in her experiences of taking magic to its extremes, both of evil in “Grave” and of good in “Chosen” (6.22, 7.22).

Similarly, Spike’s numerous disruptions result in Buffy experiencing the extremes of hatred and love that she feels for him in the last two seasons of the series. The dizzying transformations that Spike undergoes, particularly towards the end, culminate in a particular moment of coalescent meaning possibly more significant than his final burning. When Buffy has, herself, devolved to a point of being the female incarnation of

“Hate-to-be-contradicted,” her friends and family all turn on her, weary of her absolutist agenda and believing their moral uncertainty to be superior to her self-righteousness. Buffy finds herself alone in a strange house, and it is Spike who – in defiance of the masses – seeks her out. During the conversation that follows, the specter of common chaos as disorderliness again appears when Spike informs Buffy that, since she left, “it’s bloody chaos over there [...] there’s junk food cartons, sleeping bags not rolled up... everyone’s very scared and unkempt” (“Touched” 7.20)

But the workings of chaos in scientific terms are more evident in the fact of Spike’s still being around and still being in love with Buffy, the trickster having eluded trap after trap, a walking, talking example of dissipation, dissemination, and emergence. In an uncharacteristic show of extreme tenderness, Spike gives Buffy a confirmation of his faith in her and denies his own appetites for her sake:

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” 7.20)

Spike does not specify what he means by “The One.” We are not given a clear indication of whether he is referring to her status as “The Chosen One,” or to the idea, as he indicates earlier, that she is the “one thing [he’s] been sure of.” It doesn’t matter, since either option applies, but the duality reflects a simultaneous instance of both coalescence and further dissipation, as Buffy will soon defy her isolating role as “chosen” to share her power with others.

Only by means of both Willow's and Spike's emergent examples of the outgrowth of extremity is Buffy able to defeat the even-more-absolutist First Evil, through Willow's transcendence as a goddess and Spike's self-sacrifice. Only by surrendering her own hegemonic approach to power is she empowered, through allowing the workings of chaotic coalescence to determine the outcome of events already in motion.

Coalescence represents an evanescent coming-together which is evident in *Buffy* time and again. This phenomenon occurs not only with plot elements, or even with emerging character development. The coalescent moments within the text are not merely a mingling of happy and sad, of old and new narratives, or even of different approaches to literary or scientific inquiry. While all these happenings reinforce my justification for designating *Buffy* as a trickster entity, there is a limitless potential for outgrowth which I can only begin to trace here. In its entirety, the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* accomplishes an exploration of chaos, not merely as disruption for the sake of disruption, but as the means to an unforeseeable end, that end being the creation/emergence of interminable coalescent moments of meaning.

There is great power in a narrative that can accomplish this without purporting to be the source of "Truth." Indeed, beyond Whedon's original intent, *Buffy* has been swept up in the ongoing human need to believe in something bigger than ourselves. It has gone beyond living in people's imagination to, in some instances, directing the course of their lives. Like many mythologies which have preceded it, *Buffy* has so appealed to fans that several I have spoken with, even within academia, ascribe to Whedon a sort of Messianic role. T-shirts at the 28th Annual Pop Culture Association/ American Culture Association

Conference proclaimed, “Whedon is my Master now,” and “What Would Joss Do?” I suppose some people wore these light-heartedly; I suspect some did not.

I often joke with friends that the text of the Whedonverse is like the *I-Ching*. If they give me a topic, I usually can come up with some quote or other, most often from *Buffy*, which applies. The *I-Ching*'s associations with the Tao, and subsequently to Buddhism, raise some interesting questions. The operational workings of the *I-Ching* are referenced by Lewis Hyde in relation to tricksters, and by Kenneth Knoespel in relation to chaos (Hyde 110, Knoespel 114). If, like the trickster, I could outwit time and space, I might explore them further in the light of the mythological relationships to belief. But my belief in *Buffy* is of a simpler nature. I believe it to be situated at the crossroads of both academic and cultural inquiry in such a way that we must not ignore it.

In so doing, *Buffy* has the potential not only to play a mediating role between scientific and humanistic theoretical practices, as well as between older and more contemporary varieties of literary criticism, but it demands a confrontation with elitism. Contemporary examination of the modes of traditional scholarship, for some time now, has been proposing the breakdown of hierarchies between the humanities and science, between so-called “high” and “low” culture. This is work for a trickster, the work of the rebel, and *Buffy* rises to the challenge. As Anne Doueihi explains, “the trickster is [...] not a sacred being, but the way the whole universe may become meaningful, sacred, and filled with power” (201). Because *Buffy* does not try to encompass all meaning, but rather to question it and its attendant authority, it becomes that much more meaningful still.

Any text that has the scope and capacity to incorporate such diverse elements should garner respect and praise, and yet – for all its potential pomp and genuinely thoughtful commentaries – *Buffy* never aspires to be truly serious. So far as I’ve been able to discover, no *Buffy* authors have presented at academic conferences or sought to organize a religion. I chose the trickster construct as a way to understand the series among various other options because – more than anything else – the trickster inhabits his own peculiar moment of meaningfulness, which is inextricably bound up in laughter to break the monotony. Whether as that aforementioned “protest scream against death” or as the means by which we can take ourselves a little less seriously, humor is the “corridor [or] pore through which fluid may move into new areas” (Hyde 274). Laughter is, itself, a coalescent phenomenon born of “unexpected sallies” and emergence and renewal (Hyde 131). Laughter, especially when mingled with the curious nature of human inquiry, is what makes us human.

Still, unlike such other satirical texts that have garnered critical acclaim such as *The Simpsons* or *Seinfeld*, *Buffy* always carries with it a certain degree of gravitas. Certainly, the “ritual vents for social frustration” that such parodies achieve has many similarities to *Buffy*’s claims on tricksterism (Hynes 206). Yet, when we cry at Tara’s death, or are frightened by “the Gentlemen,” we are experiencing more of the totality of human emotion than humor alone will allow. Conversely, while *Star Trek*, especially *The Next Generation*, is perhaps the best corollary to *Buffy* in the scope of its emotional/genre variability, also evoking fear and rejoicing, laughter and tears, science and art, its temporal situation and Utopian underpinnings never truly allow the text to

perpetually question contemporary issues in the same “symbolic” manner that *Buffy* does (Wilcox 18).

However, much like *Star Trek*, as well as like Mandelbrot’s paisley fractals, the reiterations of *Buffy*’s incarnation have already multiplied, from the spin-off series *Angel* to a series of young adult novels, to a host of online fanfiction. While the latter two are predominantly lacking in complexity of the same magnitude that the original series encompassed, *Angel* succeeds in taking the destructive connotations of chaos in interesting new directions. Contrasting *Angel*’s entropy with *Buffy*’s negentropy could prove to be a productive undertaking. Whedon fans and scholars also anticipate the upcoming release of the graphic novel version of *Buffy*’s “Season Eight,” yet another act of escaping the trap of network cancellation, which also claimed *Angel* after its fifth season. Still other examples abound.

Amongst the most intriguing new creations is the graphic novel, *Fray*. The title character, Melaka Fray, is a futuristic slayer, street kid, and heist artist with a great deal more “edge” than her forebear, Buffy. Her older sister, Erin, is a cop always one step behind Fray’s latest “grab.” Without affection, Erin calls her sister a “thief and a liar,” two terms we’ve heard frequently in reference to tricksters (Whedon 26). Her twin brother, Harth, possesses some of the slayer powers himself, yet is perceived as simple-minded. Vampires are known as “lurks,” the Watcher’s Council has become a fanatical group of zealots, a demon named Urkonn becomes her mentor, and a “lurk” named Icarus is her nemesis. Whedon, with the help of artists Karl Moline and Andy Owens, continues to play with forms and create new avenues for interpreting his previous creations.

Nevertheless, while laced with humorous moments, Fray's world is a much darker place than Buffy's, or even Angel's, and not just because it's not in Sunnydale anymore.

Perhaps a more telling development, however, is the emergence of the recent publication, *The Physics of the Buffyverse* by Jennifer Ouellette. As one anonymous reviewer explains, "I thought it was almost rebellious to combine the previously tedious and boring subject of physics with a television show" (Amazon). *Buffy* is apparently still doing trickster work. As of the completion of this thesis, I haven't been able to review the book myself, but the mere fact of its being out there is testament to *Buffy*'s ongoing power to fascinate and regenerate, educate and mediate.

With the series nominal ending, the camera pans in on Buffy wearing a Mona Lisa smile that promises more hidden jokes and the continuing possibility of being both amused and amazed by her future. This silent compact with the chaos that has been her lot throughout the previous seven seasons is a confirmation of the power of trickster creativity, and the expectation that the unfolding of this far-sweeping "moment" has no true conclusion....

CONCLUSION?

Perhaps I should use the word “resolution” rather than “conclusion” because it connotes the image of coalescence that is so often seen in *Buffy*. Endings, from season to season, and even at the end of the series, are rarely -- if ever-- final. Buffy, who dies and is resuscitated in season one, dies again in season five, and is resurrected in season six, exemplifies the way that death is not the end in the Whedonverse. When she is shot near the end of season six, and nearly dies again, Xander teases her that “This dying is funny once, maybe twice...” (“Villains” 6.20). In a world where slaying is commonplace, Whedon and company make the point that when it comes to death, and a number of other seemingly absolute notions, nothing is certain.

Accordingly, while Angel and Oz are “gone”, having left the series, they return to make occasional cameo appearances. So does every single major villain (and a handful of other characters from all previous seasons) during season seven, by means of “The First”, which can take on the form of any person who has experienced death, including Buffy and Spike (“Lessons” 7.1). Even Buffy’s mother, Joyce, who dies a natural and apparently permanent death in season five, returns as both The First (possibly) and in an episode in which Buffy believes she is in a mental institution and has “imagined” her entire life in Sunnydale (“Normal Again” 6.17).

Through such manipulations of the impermanence of ending, the text opens perceptions to “the realms of the extraordinary and non-linear” (Hynes 205). Similarly, in the abovementioned episode, “Normal Again”, in which Buffy thinks she is insane, the show engages in a questioning of the impermanence of perception itself. This is not the

only time we come upon examples of “psychic explorers” who “[break] through into the world of normalcy and order” (Hynes 208,210). Spike also grapples with sanity throughout much of season seven, and when Buffy asks him, “Are you insane?” in a moment of lucidity he replies, “Well, yes. Where have you been all night?” (“Beneath You” 7.2).

After Buffy is resurrected, she confides to Spike that “everything here [in the “real” world] is hard and bright and violent” (“Afterlife” 6.3). This brings us back to the necessity of mythmaking. As Craig Simpson clarifies, we have a strong need for “entertaining falsehoods” as an alternative to “boring facts” and harsh reality (2). While the text of *Buffy* makes clear that when it comes to the gap between myth and reality, it is “not always the same difference,” but there are times when it just might seem to be. It is this act of brilliant seeming which demonstrates the difference in the series between “taking myths literally, and taking them seriously” (Simpson 3).

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