

Orchestrated Conflict & Real Resistance: The Revolutionary Nature of Buffy the Vampire
Slayer's Community

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In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the traditional relationship between vampires and Slayer illustrates how the powerful maintain their standing by creating structural conflict between two groups perceived as threatening. This system, however, is overturned through the actions of the eponymous heroine and the friends who surround her. The creation of the first slayer represents an effort by elder men, the Shadow Men, to tame both vampires and women. In infusing her with the demon essence, they create a woman set apart from the community of other women and thus unable to organize any broad-based resistance while also serving as a warning against strength. Her own strength, meanwhile, they direct towards taming the demonic menace of vampires, an act which bears resemblance to the practice by which those in power set oppressed (demonized) people against each other in order to deflect the strength that might otherwise be directed against them and to control their populations so that this strength may never become political dominance. Later, the Watchers' Council, with its overtones of colonization, takes on the role of directing the Slayer, creating a system of knowledge and education that reinforces the system created by the Shadow Men. Buffy Summers overcomes this taming through the creation of a female-dominated community, which eventually allows her to share her strength, and through her ability to look on vampires as individuals rather than as mere anonymous members of a population that must be eliminated because of its threatening nature. This enables her not only to overturn the power of the Council and the rules of the Shadow Men but also to defeat The First Evil-- real evil as opposed to those set against her by the powerful for their own protection.

The slayer kills vampires; vampires kill the slayer (usually before she reaches adulthood): this is the formula enforced until Buffy changes it. Even the apparently

rebellious Faith at first believes that she should slay Angel, no matter what Buffy says about him being "clean" (ep. 41, "Revelations"). Spike is reviled by demons and vampires for associating with one who kills his own kind. Each side becomes, to the other, a wholly threatening power-- that is to say, demonized in the eyes of the other-- and so they spend their time and energy attempting to eradicate each other rather than defeating those who hold power over them both.

It may seem problematic to refer to vampires in this way. Given their violent tendencies; aren't they, in Buffy's world, truly demonic and not merely demonized? In fact, they maintain much more of their humanity than that would suggest. They keep certain aspects of their earlier selves after their transformation. Why else would Jesse, in the second episode, want to claim Cordelia for himself? In the fifth episode, the man who rants on the bus rants when he returns as a vampire. Harmony retains her ditziness. Spike, until his mother says she hates him, remains a mama's boy (though he later, ironically, uses alleged total demonization to escape his pain over his mother's remarks). Long after we meet her vampire self in "The Wish" and "Doppelgangland", we learn that Willow is, like her vampire self, "kinda gay". As Giles later tells her, "In the end, we all are who we are, no matter how much we may appear to have changed" ("Lessons"). Furthermore, some vampires, such as Angel and Spike, even stop killing humans. Indeed, in "Graduation Day, Pt. 1", we learn from Anya that no pure demons exist anymore-- only "human hybrids like vampires". This shouldn't come as a surprise given that the Judge in "Surprise" (episode 25) sees Spike and Drusilla as imperfectly evil. Also, although the Judge says that "[t]here's no humanity in" the de-souled Angelus, "[t]here's no humanity in him", there is something very human about his cruelty during that season; in "Passion", Willow tells Buffy, "You're still the only thing he thinks about.". Even the cruelest vampires remain, in some respect, human.

Nonetheless, the vampires' power is threatening. To protect themselves, the Shadow

Men created "the Slayer". They forced demonic power into her ("Get It Done"), creating a conflict between her and the demons (the other demonized beings) in order to protect themselves and their authority. By contrast, this is unnecessary with those who cannot organize themselves, who are vicious animals rather than demonized humans; such beings endanger lives but don't endanger power structures. Consider werewolves. There is no mention of the first Slayer needing to defeat them, nor does the representative of the Council, which eventually takes over from the Shadow Men, believe they should be killed. Giles says, "No bullets. No matter who this werewolf is, i-it's still a human being, who may be completely unaware of his or her condition," and though this may indicate Buffy's influence on him, as it occurs late in the second season during "Phases", it still contrasts with his statements about vampires.

Not only does the Slayer protect the men in power by attacking the vampires; she also becomes a target for them, a decoy. Because of its heroine, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* has widely been recognized as challenging the horror genre convention of the young woman as helpless victim. Of course, violating a norm makes it more visible. In this case, it also provides a possible explanation for it within the world of the story. Vampires who do not know the identity of the slayer may attack young women not because these women are perceived as helpless but because they are viewed as potential slayers. Convinced that the Slayer is the greatest threat to their existence, the vampires contribute to one of the assurances the men have that the Slayer will not be able to bring her power against them: Slayers die young, before they have the opportunity to become fully aware of the surprising power imbalance of their situation and their ability to rectify it.

Besides being set against the vampires, the Slayer is isolated from other humans, which prevents her from taking on a leadership role that might threaten those in power. Indeed, isolation is so ingrained in the Slayer's identity that, at the end of season four, the

First Slayer comes after Buffy and her friends precisely because the spell used to defeat Adam fundamentally violated the Slayer's alone-ness. The elder men limited power to one woman and made certain that it was a demonized power so that she would be feared. In the dream world of "Restless", Willow doesn't even recognize the First Slayer as a person but, rather, as "some primal ... some animal force". Nor can the First Slayer even speak for herself ; she has to borrow Tara to have a voice. That the Slayer should live in such a way makes her a warning to other women who would become powerful, for such an existence looks, from the outside, unbearable-- certainly not worth the trade.

Of course, the situation, by Buffy's time, has changed somewhat; worldly power has passed from the Shadow Men to a group that sets about to create and define knowledge and instill it in the Slayer. This group is, of course, the Watcher's Council. The very term "council" implies that they have arrogated the power of judgment to themselves. In "Checkpoint", Mr. Travers describes their strength thus: "The Council fights evil. The Slayer is the instrument by which we fight. The Council remains, the Slayers change. It's been that way from the beginning". What he leaves out of this statement is the The Council defines evil. What he says, however, implies that Buffy's exceptional skill at staying alive may, in fact, be a threat to the Council. The final sentence, of course, isn't strictly true, given that the First Slayer had no Watcher ("Restless"). It is, however, typical of the colonizing mindset to count history as beginning with the arrival, or ascent to power, of one's own kind. The Council having its headquarters in the capital a former colonial power supports this interpretation. Moreover, the Council appropriates authority over the Slayer and sets about to educate the "savage" whether found in Africa or in the wilds of a high school in America or anywhere else. In fact, in the very first episode, Buffy compares Giles to "a textbook with arms". Ten episodes later, Harmony says of Buffy, "She is always hanging with that creepy librarian in that creepy library." Her comment highlights how, with the Watchers in power,

an academic education, or indoctrination, on demons becomes as important as more physical training.

The Council, to maintain the structure that gives it power, must, as part of this education, perpetuate the belief that vampires are fully demonic. In "Angel", Giles tells Buffy, "A vampire isn't a person at all. It may have the movements, the, the memories, even the personality of the person that it took over, but i-it's still a demon at the core, there is no halfway." (This statement, however, is highly problematic. How exactly can one differentiate two individuals with the same gestures, memories, and visible personality traits--not to mention the same body?) During the second season episode, "Lie to Me", Buffy demonstrates how well she has absorbed this aspect of her education (though she is already learning to make exceptions, at least for a vampire with a soul): she tells her old friend who wants to become immortal by becoming a vampire that it doesn't work that way: " You die, and a demon sets up shop in your old house, and it walks, and it talks, and it remembers your life, but it's not you". Later, Gwendolyn manipulates the Council's teachings on vampires in order to obtain the Glove of Myhnegon in "Revelations" (ep. 41).

The Council also reinforces the isolation of the Slayer. It defines the Slayer as one who is alone. The opening voiceover used for the first two seasons is spoken while the image of a book appears, suggesting the knowledge of the Council. Its language emphasizes isolation: "In every generation there is a Chosen *One*. She *alone* will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer" (emphasis mine). When explaining to Xander what a slayer is, in the second episode, Giles refers to her as "*one* girl in all the world" (emphasis mine). During the first two seasons, Buffy's desire for affiliation remains a point of contention for Watcher and Slayer.

One refinement the Council makes is to redefine the Slayer's isolation in terms of protecting others from the demonic. As Giles says in episode five, "If your identity as the

Slayer is revealed it could put you and all those around you in grave danger. " Even Buffy buys into this, to some extent, early on, telling Xander in episode 3, "I just don't like putting you guys in danger." She does, however, allow them to assist her, challenging the rules of being the Slayer. When education fails, the Council attempts to use intimidation to enforce isolation; they try to scare her friends off during the "review" in "Checkpoint".

Kendra, much more than Buffy, accepts of the Council's systems of knowledge. She believes that the Slayer must be isolated to such a degree that in the second part of "What's My Line", she is confused by the idea of the Slayer having friends. Later, she asks Buffy, "Did anyone explain to you what 'secret identity' means?" And, after observing that their lives are very different, she adds, "De tings you do and have, I was taught, distract from my calling. Friends, school... even family." She has fully absorbed that which the Council teaches its slayers, that which keeps them under control. Because she also buys the assumption that all vampires must be evil, she almost kills Angel in the first episode in which she appears ("What's My Line, Pt.1"), interrupting his attempt to find information about the Order of Taraka. In the second part of "What's My Line?", she shows that she doesn't believe in making exceptions for ensouled vampires, saying of Angel, "He's a vampire. He *should* die. Why am I de only person who sees it?"

After meeting Buffy, she starts to become re-educated. Having seen her together with Angel, when he is injured in the church, she says "Let's get him out!" ("What's My Line? , Pt 2"). Still, it is not enough for her to learn to resist power entirely. She continues to do as her Watcher tells her, and it is probably no coincidence that hypnosis plays a role in her death, as hypnosis involves a loss of control to another.

Kendra dies young in a confrontation with Drusilla, but the Watchers have also taken an extra step towards preventing slayers from becoming adults, creating a peculiar ritual for those rare ones who reach their eighteenth birthday, as revealed in the third season episode,

"Helpless". Despite the talk about "cruciamentum" being twelve centuries old, it could not possibly predate the Watcher's Council, at least not in its current form, as the Watchers are the ones who carry it out and it is said to be a test for both Watcher and Slayer. (Calling it "a time-honored rite of passage" could simply be a means of justification.) No one could seriously expect a slayer, stripped of her powers, to survive Kralik's attacks. This is murder given a sheen of purposefulness-- "your Buffy will be stronger for it"-- in order to encourage hesitant participants like Giles. Of course, is a test of his own allegiance as well, as he is later told.

That he eventually chooses to disobey them by coming to her aid illustrates how Buffy has begun to educate Giles on the value of community and on community being part of her power. While his personal character may account for his openness to this, he was , at one point, loyal enough to Council law to be appointed Buffy's Watcher in the first place. This exchange with his Council-sent replacement in "Bad Girl" reflects how he has changed:

WESLEY

Oh, yes! Here's your first entry. 'Slayer is willful and insolent.' That would be our girl, wouldn't it?

GILES

Well, you have to get to know her.

Buffy's example of affection and affiliation helps him find the wisdom to comfort her at the end of "Innocence": "Do you want me to wag my finger at you and tell you that you acted rashly? You did. A-and I can. I know that you loved [Angel]. And... he... has proven more than once that he loved you. You couldn't have known what would happen. The coming months a-are gonna, are gonna be hard... I, I suspect on all of us, but... if it's guilt you're looking for, Buffy, I'm, I'm not your man. All you will get from me is, is my support. And my respect." The learning-oriented Giles respects the Slayer who has taught him something he could never learn from his books (or at least not from the Council-approved ones). By the end of the sixth season he so fully rejects the Council's authority that the learns of Willow's

turn towards evil from a "powerful coven in Devon", a community of women, rather than from the authoritarian Council, and he goes so far as to say, "The Council haven't a clue. About much of anything, really" ("Grave"). Even so, the power of his old biases come through in "Lies My Parents Told Me" when he and Robin Wood--a Council-educated civilian, raised by a Watcher after his mother's death-- plot Spike's death, though Spike is, by that time, an important part of Buffy's community.

This community saves her repeatedly, often in ways more direct than assisting with research and with moving others out of harm's way and sometimes in ways that depend precisely on individuals' (literally or figuratively) demonized traits or identities. Witchcraft allows Willow to make the demons visible at the start of "The Zeppo" and, later, to assist Giles in completing the binding spell. In several episodes, she casts protection spells to help Buffy, as well as using magic to retrieve Buffy from a guilt-ridden catatonia in "The Weight of the World" and from the realm of the Shadow Men in "Get It Done". While witchcraft, in Buffy's world, is not as stigmatized as vampirism, the demons in "Gingerbread" who convince Sunnydale's population to burn those interested in the occult play off pre-existing biases.

Vampires, with strength and reflexes beyond those of normal humans, also play an important role in keeping Buffy alive. The first vampire to join the community, Angel, becomes the one she trusts to keep things, such as Balthazar's amulet ("Bad Girls", ep. 48) safe. Angel's super-strength allows him to prevent Caleb from landing a final killing blow in "End of Days". Spike, too, eventually fights by Buffy's side.

Buffy is even brought back from the dead twice by her friends: Xander performs CPR after she defeats the Master, and Willow brings her back after the sacrifice through which she saves Dawn. Through the intercession of her community, she has defied prophecy and the written knowledge put forth as truth by both the Master (a dominating power among

vampires) and the Council. Moreover, after being saved by members of her fledgling community, she is able to resist the Master's hypnotic powers. This foreshadows later resistance that her community will allow her to offer to the more subtle powers of the Council. Bringing Buffy back from her mystical death requires both the cooperation of several community members and ("Bargaining").

When Buffy claims power over the Council as she refuses their tests in "Checkpoint", she explicitly invokes the power of this community: "We're talking about two very powerful witches and a thousand-year-old ex-demon . . . The boy has clocked more field time than all of you combined. He's part of the unit." Not only do they give her the confidence to stand up to the council, they are part of her power, a power which Buffy, rather than accepting an established structure that would return her to the service in exchange for knowledge about Glory, demands that the Council recognize she holds over them.

Though Xander and Willow learn who Buffy is through unavoidable circumstances, she chooses, before she makes her claims over the council, to focus on building the community of which they are the first two members. In "Becoming, Pt. 2" she takes the risk of going to the hospital to check on her friends, even though the police are after her. The Mayor attempts to exploit this commitment, telling Faith, "A dog's friendship is stronger than reason, stronger than it's own sense of self-preservation. Buffy's like a dog, and hey, before you can say Jack Robinson, you'll get to see me kill her like one." Eventually, however, Buffy organizes her community-- the entire student body of Sunnydale High, in fact-- to destroy him. Later, she leads her group of friends in standing up for Tara in "Family", though earlier in the episode she and Xander discuss how little they know her and despite Tara's spell that put her at risk. Even under siege in "Spiral", she refuses to sacrifice anyone.

An important aspect of this focus on community is that Buffy sees herself as a protector of innocents, not as a warrior or hunter serving the Council or anyone else. In

"Anne", despite her misgivings, she helps Lily, who recognizes this aspect of Buffy: "[T]hat's who you are and stuff, right? I mean, you help people." In "What's My Line, Pt. 2", she goes to help the injured Oz, whereas Kendra chases after "Officer Patrice" without a second thought. This attitude is recognized when she is given the "Class Protector" award on prom night (ep. 54). Later, in "Out of My Mind", she allows Spike and Harmony to escape while she tends to Riley. Buffy's view of her role culminates in her self-sacrifice to close the portal to Hell in "The Gift". Xander explains this to the potentials in "Dirty Girls": "She's laid down her life - literally - to protect the people around her. This girl has died two times, and she's still standing . . . [Y]ou doubt her motives, you think Buffy's all about the kill, then you take the little bus to battle. I've seen her heart, and this time - not literally. And I'm telling you, right now, she cares more about your lives than you will ever know."

Though she does at times neglect it, it is this commitment to community that enables Buffy to go after the First, evil itself, rather than a merely demonized population, and defeating the First means overturning the original order imposed by the Shadow Men. Like those old men, The First is a source of structural conflict between oppressed groups. What Robin Wood says of the seal on the Hellmouth applies, metonymically, to the First: "It wants to turn these kids into monsters and victims and who knows what" ("Storyteller"). Monsters and victims, like Slayers and vampires, locked in battle, are unable to challenge the power behind the conflict or even see it. The First, however, does not build its army of demonized humans or humanized demons. Unlike the more familiar vampires, the Turok-Han show no individual personalities or "human" traits-- not even speech.

The First is enabled to show itself, perhaps even forced, because of Buffy's mystical return from the dead, which was a community effort headed by Willow; Buffy's community upsets the balance that kept the First, on the one side, and the Council, on the other hand, in power. And, as Buffy says at the end of "Bring on the Night", "There is only one thing on

this earth more powerful than evil, and that's us"; community conquers all. In the end, it is only through the empowerment of her community, which is Buffy's idea and is enacted by one of the original members of that community using sometimes stigmatized powers, that she is able to destroy the First's army. Through the act of sharing power, this spell overturns the order that has kept isolated Slayers fighting demonized others and dominated by the Shadow Men or their successors: "In every generation one Slayer is born because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule. They were powerful men. This woman [Willow] is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rule. I say my power should be our power." ("Chosen").

Both vampiric members of the community are also required in Buffy's victory. Angel brings the pendant that destroys the Hellmouth, and Spike wears it. This powerful talisman would only work for "[s]omeone ensouled but stronger than human." ("Chosen") It required someone who was demonized but not truly a demon. Indeed, we see as early as season three's "Amends" that the First is threatened by Buffy and her community-- and it is no accident that it goes after the vampiric member of her community. It recognizes that an acceptance of the "demonized" threatens the balance that benefits not only itself but also the Watcher's Council that is able to remain in control as long as there is evil to be feared. Thus, through the power of the community which Buffy has dedicated herself to building and protecting, she is not only protected from the everyday vampires and demonized others who are set against her and enabled to overturn the Council's control over her, but also able to fundamentally alter the balance created by the original creators of the Slayer by empowering other women and confronting real evil.

Buffy's community is not a small, homogeneous circle that demonizes others in order to protect itself (as did the Shadow Men who created the first slayer), nor is it a Council that keeps individuals' power focused and in check through systemic education in order to

maintain its own power. That sort of group might save the world (indeed, previous Slayers under the direction of the Watcher's Council probably have done so), but it takes something else to change it, which as Willow notes, in the end of "Chosen", is what Buffy and her crew achieve. It requires a mutually empowering community with open (and open-minded) membership. This may, however, be a bit more complicated to implement in a world in which the First Evil, if it does exist, has not overtly revealed itself, since it is the First that provides the catalyst for the full-fledged emergence of Buffy's community. And, since the series end with that victory, we do not get to see if Buffy is able to resist the temptations of power and to keep her community open instead of giving in to us vs. them thinking. Nonetheless, she begins on this path when good and evil are not so stark, a world like much ours today-- if you forget for a moment about the supernatural.