

Philipp Kneis

“I Touch the Fire and it Freezes Me”. Soul-Searching on Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel¹

This paper was conceptualized for a conference at which every participant would know the series cited by heart; some references may thus appear obscure to the uninitiated.

The longer and complete version of this talk can be found in the following book:

Philipp Kneis.

The Emancipation of the Soul. Memes of Destiny in American Mythological Television.

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see also: pjkk.com/es

1. Introduction

It's not about a girl. I mean, of course it is, but not just quite. It's about something else, some things within, some without, things beyond understanding, and things lurking beneath us. “From beneath you, it devours” (B 7.02 “Beneath You,” 2:57-3:03). From beneath, devours. The devourer came to Earth, promising eternal peace at the price of losing free will. It may appear, on the surface, to be about good, to be about bad, but in the end, it's neither: “It's about power” (B 7.01 “Lessons” 39:13-39:30).

But let us go back to the beginning. In the beginning, it's about a girl. A high-school girl receiving both a high honor and immense power: She alone is chosen, she will stand between the darkness and the light. She is destined to do so, she is chosen, she did not have a choice. The choice has been made for her. She's got the power, but it has been given to her, she has not gained it by her own free will. From day one, all she really wants is to return to being a normal girl, to finally “live like a person” (B 7.22 “Chosen” 41:10-41:12). In the end, she can, because she has used that power and turned it around. She has changed destiny, reclaimed her free will, found her true self, her soul, and changed the world, a lot.

In another beginning, there was a boy, an Irish boy, a drunkard, a bum, who was let loose from the leash of ethical and familial bonds and turned into the killer with the angelic face. After decades of mayhem, his soul was re-imposed unto him, and he had to confront that inside of him that needed the killing, not the demon, but “the man” (B 3.10 “Amends,” 37:41-40:10). He was to make amends, not through his own, free will, but through circumstance imposed upon him.

In yet another beginning, Angelus made a monster out of the poet-turned-vampire, Spike. Both came to fall in love with the same girl eventually, but it was the poet who would be saved by that. Even before getting a chip implanted by a governmental demon-fighting initiative, he “stink[s] of humanity” (B 2.13 “Surprise” 34:18-21). The chip only served as a catalyst, preventing him from killing humans directly, but it was love that let him fight to reclaim his soul. He rediscovered his own initiative, his free will.

There are other stories like that. Anya, a woman scorned twice, who twice chose to become a vengeance demon, having to rediscover her humanity after her powers had been

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taken from her, again twice. Andrew, having to cope with his crimes past. Willow, having to live with the consequences of her actions rather than just be punished and killed. Xander, having to overcome his fear of commitment. Giles, haunted by a past of playing with demonic forces beyond his control. Wesley, who, although thinking of doing the right thing, having betrayed Angel in the most horrific way possible. Gunn, having killed Professor Seidel for his girl Fred, a man who had sent her to hell in the past. Gunn also has to find his place in the world as a previous anti-demon gang leader. Cordelia and Harmony, simply having to grow up from their bitchy high-school personas. Connor, who has to learn to control the monster within, and to see beyond death and destruction. Illyria, an ancient demon leader, having invaded the body of Fred, having lost her powers and faced with humanity and a world that doesn't bow to her wishes. Oz, hovering between man and wolf. Lorne, whose final task from Angel putting him in a role similar to Giles, who had to kill Ben in the Season 5 finale. Faith, the slayer-turned-murderer-turned-slayer, learning that the negation of humanity only leads to the destruction of the self, and that making amends is inevitable. Principal Wood, who has to overcome his desire for revenge and see Spike as what he has become, not what he was. And finally, Darla, the dear one, who never had a chance in life, who was turned into a monster twice, sacrificing herself in her last moment of humanity, before Connor's birth would have turned her into a monster again.

All of these are characters that have been broken, that have edges. All of these have to live with the consequences of their actions. There can only be consequences, and there can only be true responsibility, if there is free will.

Free will is emancipation from circumstance, from factors biological and cultural, from forces internal and external, from demons within and daimonic, god-like, stronger-than-life-forces existing outside of us.

On *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, the fight to reclaim the fire within, the fight for the soul, is the fight for individuality in the light of destiny and fate, the fight for change in the shadow of greater powers already established. It is about recognizing responsibility, the ability to respond, about accepting it, learning from it, in order to move on. When Anya asks Giles in "The Wish", "what makes you think that the other world is anything better than this", he responds, "because it has to be" (B 3.09 "The Wish," 39:42-41:15).

2. The Coherence of Narrative and the Use of Mythology

The grand and epic narrative of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* makes use of various elements like prophetic dreams foreshadowing future events, prophecies and a general notion of fate and destiny. In comparison with more conventional modes of television storytelling, the *Buffy* universe creates a rich text that possesses both retrospective and prospective coherence. It's not just that the past gets explained by added layers of narrative, it's also that certain elements of a future yet to come are mentioned in beforehand.

Here we have a development in prime time television narration that can be found in other relatively recent shows like *The X-Files* and *Babylon 5* as well. What this structure allows for is to create a text that possesses much more tangibility and dimension than, for instance, a prime time detective show of the past. The existence of such kind of complex storytelling appears to be connected to the assumed existence of a more attentive audience, and it probably is no coincidence that this is linked to the science-fiction/horror/fantasy uber-genre which is able to feed easily into an already existing frame of reference. For the shows *Buffy* and *Angel*, it is very much possible to be quoting franchises like *Star Trek*, *The X-Files*, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *James Bond*, because this is an audience that knows all these.

The topos of individuality as set against greater authority and destiny is not essentially a new one, especially in America. Yet there can be found a re-emergence of themes like this in recent time. It's a matter of how central such a theme is to a text, how directly the conflict is spelled out. On *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the fight is directed against insidious forces of darkness, yet in the end, that struggle always ends with the establishment of new, but better, royal rule (Brin 2003). On *Star Trek*, we usually encounter a society that is already eu-topian, and which is constantly compared and contrasted against divergent models of authority and rule. But the social order of Earth is no longer in serious negotiation, and exceptions from the rule are found in single instances only. Slightly different cases are *Voyager* and *Enterprise*, but again, the questions posed therein are always set against the context of an already established social paradise.

If we look at literature, there sure is an abundance of texts challenging social norms of behavior and structures of authority. In William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, we find main characters struggling for individuality against an overarching societal establishment, but the fight is mostly focused on the personal sphere, it stays within the family.

It usually remains within the realm of directly political stories or political allegories to negotiate matters of individuality in the light of authority, and since authors like Plato², Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* (1627), Tommaso Campanella's *Civitas Solis* (1623), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Jule Verne, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and Isaac Asimov, the most suitable genre has been that of the greater science-fiction / horror / fantasy uber-genre. That is not to say that matters of political importance cannot be negotiated in any other way, one prime case being directly political or historical stories like Shakespeare's dramas about kings, movies like Oliver Stone's *Nixon* and heart-of-darkness-type or dystopian stories like Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, and of course shows like *The West Wing*. But usually, the narrative potential within the more mythological uber-genre allows for a different kind of stories that can offer much more allegorical and bolder stories.

As television gives the narrative much more space to develop, there exists a greater potential for stories of fate and destiny, and with the advent of *The X-Files*, *Babylon 5* and the Whedon shows (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Firefly*), this potential has been realized. It is connected to a mode of storytelling that no longer centers on individual episodes but on seasons or even the entire series itself. *The X-Files* tells a story about individuals who position themselves against a greater conspiracy. *Babylon 5* tells different stories of emancipation from false authority, one featuring the fight against a fascist dictatorship on Earth, another the emancipation of the "younger races" against their quasi-caretakers, the Vorlons and the Shadows, who want to keep them in a state of having no other choice but that between order and chaos, no choice of their own, but a choice laid upon them. The "third age of mankind" is described as that which no longer sees humans and humanoid civilizations subjected to old, aristocratic authority.

On the third season of *Enterprise*, the fight against destiny is the fight against the timeline in a temporal cold war, it is the fight against probability, against possible future outcomes of present actions, a leitmotif that occasionally manifests itself within the *Star Trek* universe and is also taken up by *Farscape*.

² The story of Atlantis and Ancient Athens in the dialogs of *Timaeus* and *Critias*

3. The Emancipation of the Soul

Returning to the Whedon-verse, we find an abundance of instances in which the shows aim to subvert authority without just replacing it. The very structure of the Scooby gang, of Angel Investigations and of Malcolm Reynolds' crew does feature a nominal leader in Buffy, Angel and Mal respectively, yet command decisions are usually a matter of the group. At a decisive moment in *Angel*, he subordinates himself to the cause and respects the group as his CEO, the cause being more important to him than his authority as a champion.

The role of champion then is not an exclusive one. Each member of the group has their specific "powers", be they supernatural or not. Furthermore, championship is deliberately and frequently depicted as being not a matter of position, heritage or destiny, but a matter of concrete actions and engagement. Leadership and authority cannot be empty shells, they need to be proven time and again, and they have to undergo constant questioning. Nor can they stand in contrast or opposition to the group. That's why Buffy loses the group in the end of season seven, she has become a lone wolf leader who denies others their right to partake in the decision-making process. Buffy only regains the control of the group by winning back their trust.

The multiple levels of power are scattered throughout the group, the means of knowledge production and control, of practical power and the control of the general discourse, as well as that of magic, are not split along gender lines. Willow, Winnifred, Wesley and Andrew possess knowledge both technological and mystical.

If we follow Erich Fromm's model of male, success-based love, and female, all-encompassing love (Fromm 1941, 52-79), Giles is father, and Giles is mother, especially towards Willow in her moment of crisis. He does want success for his "children", but his love is not dependent upon that.

In general, not only do the female characters partake in power structures, the male characters are also freed from the poisoning effects of power. If we follow the psycho-analyst Arno Grün (1984), the split between male agentive authority and female emotional authority, which is usually understood as the basis of the "paternalistic" split and separation of the spheres in society, may appear to favor the males, but only if you look at political power. It also leads to an estrangement from family and emotionality, as demonstrated by the common catch-phrase of "boys don't cry". The female sphere then, historically cursed with political structural irrelevance, suffers from a feeling of worthlessness and helplessness. The alternative emancipatory model proposed by the Whedon shows avoids the simple role-reversal by integrating male and female gender roles into each single person, and the quest for the soul becomes the quest for the emotionally balanced, dis-estranged and empowered psyche.

As in the Whedon-verse there's much room for tragedy, persons also tend to make mistakes, and to walk the path that's not supposed to be walked. Angel has his major crisis in season 2, the culmination being his surrendering to Darla, and his accepting Holland Manner's statement that earth is hell. Charles Gunn, in order to keep his new lawyer life, makes a deal with the devil that will lead to Fred's death. Wesley, trusting a prophesy more than his heart, kidnaps Angel's son, which makes him play the role of Judas Iscariot. Buffy, in season 6, struggles to confirm to the necessities of ordinary life after being pulled out of heaven by her friends. All those are instances of negotiating the relation of the self with the larger group or society.

The quest for the soul that Buffy specifically undergoes in Season 6 is made clear in B 6.07 "Once More, With Feeling" (2:00-3:40), where she admits that she's just "going through

the motions”, that she feels empty and dead inside, that when she touches the fire, it freezes her (ibid. 35:05-35:30). She has to find a new role, she has to become an adult, and she has to learn to take matters into her own hands. She learns that by confronting her inner demons.

4. Daimonion

As on *Star Trek* the different alien races seem to represent different aspects of humanity, the demon population of the Buffyverse can be understood as an allegory to human character traits. Demons are not necessarily evil, they are just superior to ordinary humans, they are daimonia, god-like creatures. If we understand them in the context of Plato’s *daimonion*, they serve as a catalyst or signifier that tells us something about our own humanity. Angelus, by Angel’s own admission, is not evil because he is a vampire, he is evil only through the loss of the soul: But that needs not be an indication of evil at all. Spike, long before having regained his soul, knew what was right and wrong, but the chip didn’t tell him that, it only restricted his violent urges (B 7.10 “Bring on the Night”).

As demonstrated by the ambiguity of each character in the Buffyverse, good and evil are potential pathways amongst which we are able to choose. If this choice is taken from us, that also diminishes the possibility of making an ethical judgement. Is a demon who is evil by design truly evil? Is a man who is good by design truly good? Both Caleb, representing the first Evil, and Jasmine, claiming to want good, speak of purity, a purity of dogma that divides the world between black and white, forcing others into the role of either being with or against them, leaving out the grey area the main characters of the show are situated within. As shown by the very existence of demons or half-breeds that are situated either in the grey zone or on the good side themselves, like Whistler, Doyle, Clem, Lorne, Harmony and the demi-gods Buffy, Faith and Connor, “demon” doesn’t mean “bad by design”. It is the fanaticism that divides the world into “us” and “them” which leads Charles Gunn’s originally well-meaning “Old Gang” of his (A 3.03 “That Old Gang of Mine”) to kill innocent or harmless demons just because they are different, and not because they act in an evil manner.

Sweet, the music demon in B 6.07 “Once More, With Feeling,” as well as the demon that puts Buffy in a state where she is confronted with a different reality in B 6.17 “Normal Again,” clearly function as a *daimonion*, in that they offer either an alternative view of reality, quicken up situations, or invoke conscience. It is no coincidence that Sweet and also Lorne use music to clear up the situation, it is the language of emotions and the soul that matters.

5. An Apocalypse, Now & Then

The balance of power in the Buffyverse gets disrupted in *Buffy’s* season 7 and *Angel’s* season 4: On *Buffy*, we have the first evil struggling for dominance, and Buffy herself has become much stronger than ever intended by the powers. On *Angel*, we have Jasmine trying to create world peace by eliminating free will. The Senior Partners of good and bad are staging a battle to which the humans are only secondary. It’s a battle that uses prophecies and ancient forces to decide the global power play once and for all.

The occasional apocalypse within the Buffyverse is all about power. It’s about who determines what’s right and wrong, it’s about changing the order of the world. Both sides line up their lieutenants, who will act accordingly. Some conform to that scheme, others, however, act in defiance of that by doing what’s right not out of external considerations but because of their inner conviction. They follow principle, and see that the ends do not justify the means. There are still those doing the dirty work, just as Giles tells Ben about Buffy, who would let him live, because she won’t kill a human, “She’s a hero, you see. She’s not like us” (B 5.22 “The Gift” 36:20-36:25), meaning, her principle of doing good for the sake of good and not for the

sake of power, gets in the way of things, but lets her keep her humanity. Faith, when she switched bodies with Buffy, starts parodying that trait of hers, when she poses in the mirror, mimicking Buffy's "because it's wrong" routine. In the end, though, Faith realizes the trueness of Buffy's morality, and says it herself, finally converted, and having taken her first step towards repentance. For even though ethics may sometimes seem to get in the way of solving problems, circumventing ethics means emptying the fight from its original purpose. One cannot fight for peace and freedom by taking away free will, one cannot fight for morality while having lost it oneself. Buffy's insistence on good for the sake of good may appear purist itself, but what makes it different is her choice of method. She's not like Professor Walsh whose fight became corrupted by corrupted measures and an insistence on following authority blindly.

The apocalypses in the Buffyverse are about choices and accepting fate, or not. But initial circumstance doesn't determine the outcome. Angel's soul was imposed upon him, Spike sought it out for himself. Nevertheless, they have learned to do what's right, they don't conform to the language of power, control and authority. Angel's not being corrupted by the Wolf, the Ram & the Hart, he is able to withstand the seduction of power, but he is in a way bound by the constraints of the machinery of bureaucracy. Through Cordelia, Connor and Illyria, he overcomes his inertia and finally understands that power can be used to eventually destroy it, after Illyria tells Angel that power can be used to make a difference. "You must serve no master but your ambition", she tells him, and reactivates his sense of agency, his belief that things matter.

As Gunn puts it regarding the fight against destiny and fate, after Fred asking him, "Will it make a difference? We really are just pieces being moved around a board", and he says,

Then we'll kick it over and start a new game. Look, monochrome can yap all he wants about no-name's cosmic plan, but here's a little something I picked up rubbing mojos these past couple of years. The final score can't be rigged. I don't care how many players you grease, that last shot always comes up a question mark. But here's the thing—you never know when you're taking it. It could be when you're duking it out with the Legion of Doom, or just crossing the street deciding where to have brunch. So you just treat it all like it was up to you—the world in the balance—'cause you never know when it is. (A 4.17 "Inside Out" 31:15-31:57)

6. Heroism

Holland Manners once told Angel that Wolfram & Hart would have no other agenda than power itself. "We have no intention of doing anything so prosaic as winning [...] we--go on, no matter what" he said. "Then why fight", asks Angel (A 2.15 "Reprise" 35:22-36:27), and he is given his answer by Lindsay finally: "Heroes don't accept the world as what it is, they fight it" (A 5.17 "Underneath" 38:07-38:20).

The difference between these positions is crucial: Power may corrupt, but it can also empower. It can only truly empower once the individual has recognized their path, their soul, after a process of true emancipation. Those in the Buffyverse who seek power for its own sake, are prone to be corrupted by it, but those who actively recognize their responsibility to make a choice, to make a stand against the proponents of a static world view, against those who have learned to live with the way things are going, only those will be able to finally create their own destiny.

That destiny is one which is not prewritten, that recognizes mistakes when they occur, and that does not conform to externally determined roles and positions. It's a destiny not of compliance, acceptance and inaction, it's not prewritten in a prophesy, so you can just write those off. On the very contrary, it is an ongoing process, a path itself, with an outcome

unknown, just as Angel puts it in the end (A 5.22 “Not Fade Away” 41:12-41:14), “Let’s go to work”.

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