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BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER.
THE MAIDEN IS DEATH: DEATH IS HER GIFT¹

ABSTRACT

Buffy The Vampire Slayer was a television series broadcast from 1997 to 2003. The narrative follows the heroine, Buffy Summers, ostensibly a normal teen, however she is also the latest in a long line of Slayers. Death is a gift of the Slayer. The three facets of this gift point to the conclusion that Buffy, the Maiden, is Death.

KEYWORDS: Buffy, vampire slayer, death, maiden, quest, gift

STRESZCZENIE

Buffy The Vampire Slayer jest serialem telewizyjnym, który był wyświetlany w latach 1997–2003. Fabuła śledzi losy bohaterki, Buffy Summers, pozornie przeciętnej nastolatki, która jednakże jest najmłodszym przedstawicielem rodu Slayers – Pogromców. Śmierć jest ich “darem”. Wiele aspektów tego “daru” prowadzi do podsumowania, że Buffy – dziewica – jest Śmiercią.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Buffy, pogromczynie wampirów, śmierć, dziewica, misja, dar

INTRODUCTION

‘Death is what I live and breathe’. (*Potential*. S7E12) It is at the live, beating heart of who Buffy Summers is. Buffy Summers, a lightweight, sunny, Valley Girl name but Buffy is The Slayer, the heart of darkness. Take away the weapons, take away her friends, take away hope, strip back all the wit and banter, and what is left is the very image of Death, because that is what The Slayer is.

Buffy challenges many filmic conventions – in horror the pretty blonde is the victim of the vampires; Buffy subverts that with deliberate intent. Joss Whedon is often quoted as saying he wanted to explore what it would be like for the vampire

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to be afraid of the pretty blonde. Even her name, Buffy, is a subversion... “I’m the thing that monsters have nightmares about. And right now, you and me are gonna show ‘em why.” (*Showtime*. S7E11)

HISTORY

Buffy the Vampire Slayer first came to the screen as a film in 1992. It was not a particularly successful film but it introduced us to The Slayer and some of the mythology surrounding her. The TV series opened in the US on March 10, 1997 and ran until May 20, 2003.

Joss Whedon created the film and the series under the banner of his Mutant Enemy Productions Company. The series was hugely successful and internationally popular. Although it features a teenage heroine and was created with a teen audience in mind, it found popularity across a much wider demographic developing a cult following. The show remains popular and Buffy’s story continues in graphic text form. Appearances by the cast at events such as Comic-Con, continue to draw fans, re-runs and Buffy Marathons attract new audiences.

MEET BUFFY SUMMERS

When we first meet Buffy she is 16 and it is her first day at Sunnydale High. This makes her at approximately the same stage of life as the initial target audience of the show. Buffy and her friends will age along with each season and will go through the same types of growing experiences as their audience. They will experience heartbreak, exams, choosing a college and they will experience these in a realistic time frame along with the audience.

At the time of its premier, Buffy was an original and unexpected show. It had a strong female protagonist and a cast of young characters each of whom was a clearly articulated and fully realised individual. The show is often referenced as having a strong feminist message and creating a positive role model for young women. As the narrative progresses, each of the characters grow and change in response to experience and to their environment, creating a new model of story telling and narrative progression.

Buffy Summers is the Chosen One, The Slayer. The series centres itself around Buffy and her friends at Sunnydale High. A light and cheery name hiding a dark heart. The Hellmouth, a mystical portal and centre for demonic and supernatural activity, is directly beneath the library of Sunnydale High. Buffy succeeds in closing the Hellmouth but Sunnydale remains a place of powerful forces that draw demons and other creatures to it. She may have closed it, but the Hellmouth is still there and continues to draw evil. As Buffy says ‘...we are standing on the mouth of Hell...It’s gonna choke on me...’ (*Bring on the Night*. S7E10)

MEET THE SLAYER

The Slayer lives a short and violent life. She must protect the innocent and fight evil. Her Watcher will aid her in this, it is his job to train and guide her. We learn that in most cases this role is somewhat passive and that the Watchers Council, the governing body of these Watchers, has become a bureaucracy rather than a guiding council. It guards its knowledge, and its power, and is unable to adapt well to the threats in the real world. Buffy quips, “Power, I have it, they don’t. And it bothers them”. (*Checkpoint*. S5E12) To the Council, slayers are expendable, there is always one to follow. This idea does not sit well with Buffy. To them, the sacrifices a slayer and her watcher make are not just necessary, but unquestionable and expected. To Buffy, they are her life. (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*. S1E1)

GILES: Yes. No! He – he – trains her, he prepares her –

BUFFY: Prepares me for what? For getting kicked out of school? Losing all my friends? Having to spend all my time fighting for my life and never getting to tell anyone because it might ‘endanger’ them? Go ahead. Prepare me.

In Seasons 1–5, becoming The Slayer, accepting her calling, discovering her powers and understanding their source and consequences, provide the primary theme and narrative arc. Seasons 6 and 7 follow Buffy as she gathers potential slayers (young women who have not yet been called but are identified as potentially the next slayer) and prepares them for a final battle with The First Evil, an entity of the first evil in the world. The First is the embodiment of true evil, older than anything, including the Old Ones that the slayers were created to fight against, defend the innocent from and to die to stop. (*Hush*. S4E10) The First tells Buffy at their initial encounter... “I am something that you can’t even conceive. The First Evil. Beyond sin, beyond death.”

Slayers are supernaturally gifted with strength, speed, resilience, healing capacity, and foresight. Many of the slayers also possess extra perception. Buffy shares this trait and it manifests in cryptic, prophetic dreams. Buffy is the latest in a long line of slayers; young girls who are chosen to fight the forces of evil and the supernatural. Hers is a mystical calling, a sacred duty, which endows her with these qualities. Buffy may be The Slayer but she is determined to live a normal life, one in which her duty as The Slayer is only a part of her life. Her Watcher, Giles, supports her, initially with reluctance. (*The Wish*. S3E9)

BUFFY: The world is what it is—we fight, we die. Wishing doesn’t change that.

GILES: I have to believe in a better world.

BUFFY: Go ahead. I have to live in this one.

Buffy is different to slayers past and Giles soon learns he must be a different kind of watcher. Buffy begins the series declaring she has retired and will only slay if it is absolutely necessary, otherwise, she’s out. By the end of Season 1 she

has not only accepted her calling and duty, but she has begun to excel at it, she also learns that it's not all pointy stakes and fancy dress.

When Slayer, Kendra, arrives in Sunnydale, she is horrified to find Buffy has friends and that she goes to school and lives with her own family. Slayers are traditionally alone, dependent on their Watcher. Kendra and her Watcher live in complete secret, studying and training with no emotional ties. This is in complete contrast to Buffy, her friends not just knowing about her, but actively helping her.

BUFFY'S QUEST

Buffy has begun her quest to become a heroine. In *Prophecy Girl*, (S1E13) she learns of a prophecy that says that she will die fighting The Master. This is how Buffy learns death is central to The Slayer's existence. She is Death, it is part of her make up and it is her gift and her calling. To be a Slayer is to be, and to live, Death, to deliver it and to expect it. (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*. S1E1)

BUFFY: You know I'm the Chosen One. It's my job to fight guys like that. What's your excuse?

GILES: Buffy, I'm not sending you out there to die.

Buffy resists the idea she is a killer. She, as The Slayer, is chosen to do a job, she has a sacred duty to kill the vampires and demons, to protect the innocent and helpless, to save the world from the evil of the dark, the creatures of the night. She accepts that as the Chosen One, she is apart, she has a duty. She is not, in that context a killer or a murderer.

To kill an innocent, regardless of that human's morality, is to step outside her duty and become a murderer. When Dracula tells Buffy she is a hunter – a predator – she rejects this out of hand. He also tells her that her powers are rooted in darkness – she is his kindred. (*Buffy vs Dracula*. S5E1) Her experience has made her very aware of the fine line between slaying and killing.

KENDRA, FAITH AND BUFFY

When Buffy died briefly fighting The Master, Kendra was called to be the next Slayer, and she is the perfect slayer. Kendra was given to her Watcher as a young child and raised in secret following the tradition of slayers. She is controlled, disciplined and a technically brilliant fighter. She also has an academic knowledge of Slayer Law and Demonology. She contrasts with, but complements, Buffy. She

is Buffy's light. To Kendra's control Buffy has adaptability; to Kendra's discipline, imagination; and Kendra's technical brilliance at fighting; Buffy's innovation and inventiveness. (*What's my Line? Pt2. S2 E*)

BUFFY: Handbook? What handbook? How come I didn't get a handbook?

WILLOW: Is there a T-shirt too? Cause, that would be cool ...

GILES: After meeting you, Buffy, I was quite sure the handbook would be of no use in your case.

BUFFY: What do you mean – "it would be of no use in my case?" What's wrong with my case?

Buffy and Kendra complement each other and this is most clear when fighting. Saving Angel from Spike and Drusilla, they put on a virtuoso display of slayer skill and power. (*What's My Line? Pt2. S2E10*)

If Kendra is Buffy's light, then Slayer Faith must be her darkness. As a potential Slayer, Faith was assigned a watcher, however, when her watcher was killed the Watcher's Council did not replace him and Faith was left alone, to use her slayer skills as survival skills. Faith is unpredictable, emotionally damaged and without the boundaries a watcher would have taught her. Buffy and Kendra grow in mutual respect and form a formidable fighting team, much to Kendra's surprise, but with Faith, their initial friendship is destroyed when they accidentally kill a human, an act forbidden by Slayer Law. This begins to tear them apart as Buffy's guilt and remorse is not reflected within Faith. (*Graduation Day. Pt1. S3E21*)

Faith embraces the Death that is within a Slayer's nature and it controls her; she seeks it out, it excites her and drives her to find more, eventually becoming a killer. Kendra accepts death as part of her duty; she kills to protect, her own death, she understands is inevitable. In Seasons 1 and 2 Buffy treats slaying as a job, but after meeting Kendra she begins to accept slaying as her duty: her sacred calling – who she is. (*What's My Line? Pt2. S2E*)

KENDRA: You always do that.

BUFFY: Do what?

KENDRA: You talk about slaying like it's a job. It's not. It's who you are.

BUFFY: You get that from the handbook?

KENDRA: From you

Ultimately Buffy and Faith engage in a fight to the death and Buffy kills Faith – or so she believes. Faith is an image of what Buffy could have been without a watcher – without the grounding her friends and family provide for her. Buffy learns from Kendra about the self-discipline and the sacrifice of a Slayer. She learns that accepting herself as Death, that it is her nature; and to acknowledge this, will gain her control over her nature. From Faith Buffy learns the consequences of rejecting control, and embracing and seeking Death and of its allure. It is Faith's darkness, also in Buffy, that Dracula refers to when he challenges her. (*Buffy vs Dracula. S5E1*)

- BUFFY:** You've heard of me?
- DRACULA:** Naturally. You're known throughout the world.
- BUFFY:** Naw!... Really?
- DRACULA:** Why else would I come here? For the sun? I came to meet the renowned killer.
- BUFFY:** I prefer the term "Slayer." "Killer" just sounds so...
- DRACULA:** Naked?
- BUFFY:** Like I paint clowns or something. I'm the good guy, remember?
- DRACULA:** Come now. You can't deny your history.
- BUFFY:** What do you mean, history? I hail from a long line of white hats, period.
- DRACULA:** Perhaps. But your power is rooted in darkness. You must feel it.

THE SLAYER AND DEATH

Slayers have a clear moral duty. Buffy accepts her calling and the sacrifices she makes for it, but these make her life as Buffy, teenager, become less clear. Who is she and what is it really that she does, who really is The Slayer? When she sacrifices her beloved Angel (*Becoming. Pt2. S2E22*) to save the world at the end of Season 2, she truly begins to understand the meaning of loss and the deeper nature of her life as a slayer, travelling further along the road to recognising her personal quest. Dracula meets Buffy during her nightly patrol. Initially skeptical, Buffy is intrigued by him as he tells her things she did not know. (*Buffy vs Dracula. S5E1*) Dracula tells her... "You think you know. What you are, what's to come...you haven't even begun."

The Slayers' relationship to Death has three features. The first is that she is Death – Death to the demons and vampires and other supernatural evils. She is feared by them. Buffy is legendary, to meet her is to die. She is so feared that Dracula himself comes to Sunnydale in an attempt to seduce her to accept the darkness of her nature and join him.

She struggles to understand her affinity with Death. This becomes her personal quest, to understand herself, her nature as The Slayer, her powers and their origins. Embracing this is crucial to her final task. This quest, to find these answers, is at the heart of her journey from teen to heroine. As Buffy, matures she continues to question her role as the slayer. Dracula's arrival poses serious questions to Buffy. (*Real Me. S5E2*)

- BUFFY:** I've changed so much since I first became the slayer. I'm still changing. Ever since we did that spell that called on the first slayer... I've been going out a lot. Every night...
- GILES:** Patrolling.
- BUFFY:** Hunting. That's what Dracula called it, and he was right. He understood my power, better than I do. He saw darkness in it. I need to know more. About where I come from. About the other slayers. Maybe if I learn to control this thing – maybe I could even be better, stronger... But I'm scared.

Buffy had been a popular girl, untroubled by responsibilities and the demands of life. A slayer died and she became the next slayer, randomly chosen from all the girls in the world (potentials) that could have been slayers. Her life changed and she could no longer be normal, as she had understood it. Buffy does not want to die, she wants a normal, safe teenage girl life. After her first experiences slaying, she is over it. Learning to accept her duty she needs to create a new kind of life. (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*. S1E1)

BUFFY: Oh, why can't you leave me alone?

GILES: Because you are the Slayer.

GILES: Into every generation a Slayer is born. One girl, in all the world, a Chosen One. One born with the –

BUFFY & GILES: – the strength and skill to hunt the vampires –

BUFFY: To stop the spread of their evil, blah, blah, I've heard it, okay?

GILES: I don't understand this attitude. You've accepted your duty, you've slain vampires before –

BUFFY: Well, I have both been there and done that. And I am moving on.

Buffy finds she cannot deny her nature but she can mitigate it. With the help of Giles and her friends, collectively known as the Scooby Gang, she is able to carry out her duties as Slayer and have some semblance of a normal life. The Scoobys, initially just friends, become key to her success and take an active part in her fight against evil. (*What's My Line? Pt1*. S2E9). Giles explains to a surprised and wary Kendra,

GILES: "There are a few people, civilians if you will, who know Buffy's identity. Willow is one of them. And they also spend time together. Socially."

Buffy explains to Kendra that her emotions and her connection to her friends and to her family are what gives her power, they are a source of her greatest strength. In the episode, *Intervention*, (S5E18) where she seeks out guidance from the First Slayer, she is told Death is her Gift, but it is Love that burns brightest in her, it is her love that will lead her to her gift. (*Primeval*. S4E21). The First Slayer, Sineya, answers her question saying, 'Love. Give. Forgive. Risk the pain. It is your nature. Love will bring you to your gift...Death is your gift.'

Her friends and her family keep her grounded, they give her support and emotional strength, and they give her a reason to fight. In the final episodes of Season 5, it is her sister for whom she will fight and die, sacrificing everything to save. The second feature of the Slayer's relationship with Death is that she will fight to her own death to protect and defend the helpless and the innocent. This is why she fights. She has the strength and skills to do what ordinary people cannot. It was for this purpose that slayers were created. They fight to be the death of vampires and demons, to defend and protect the innocent.

This is no more clearly shown than in Season 1 when she is pitted against the oldest and most powerful of all vampires, The Master. (*The Harvest*. S1E2). As Buffy leaves to find The Master, Jenny Calendar speaks to her,

MS CALENDAR: “You fight the Master, you’ll die.”

BUFFY: “Maybe...But maybe I’ll take him with me.”

In her first battle with The Master, Buffy dies and is given CPR by Xander, one of the Scoobys. In a following episode she goes on to defeat The Master in a battle not only of strength, but of character, proving she is not the naïve child he claimed she was. (*The Harvest*. S1E2)

MASTER: Yes. Come forth, my child. Come into my world.

BUFFY: I don’t think it’s yours just yet.

The Master turns his head and stares at her in surprise.

MASTER: You’re dead!

BUFFY: I may be dead, but I’m still pretty. Which is more than I can say for you.

MASTER: You were destined to die! It was written!

BUFFY: What can I say? I flunked the written.

The fight to protect the helpless and the innocent is not without its cost. Her boyfriend, Angel is a vampire, cursed with a soul. He is able to feel remorse, guilt and empathy and love. The Slayer and a vampire, the ultimate forbidden love. Her impulse to fight and protect the world from evil is so strong that when Angel loses his soul and returns to being a particularly vicious vampire, she kills him, sending him to Hell. (*Becoming. Pt2*. S2E22). Buffy laments, “I sacrificed Angel to save the world. I loved him so much... but I knew what was right.”

The most potent aspect of the Slayer’s relationship with Death, is her own death as sacrifice. Finally understanding this is the end of Buffy’s quest. It is Buffy’s job to save the world, regardless of personal cost. (*Spiral*. S5E20) Buffy and Giles talk, knowing what is at stake as they prepare to fight Glory. They both recognise the apparent hopelessness of the situation, Giles tells Buffy, “You did... what was necessary. What I’ve always admired...”

The episode, *The Gift*, (S5E22) is the final for Season 5. Glory, a hell god, discovers Dawn, Buffy’s younger sister, is a mystical being and the key to returning to her own dimension, she will go to any lengths to capture her; and Buffy will go to any lengths to protect and save her. Not only is Dawn her sister, but an innocent. Buffy is compelled to save her, ultimately choosing to sacrifice herself in Dawn’s place to stop Glory’s plan. As she prepares to die she tells Dawn that she finally understands and that it is good. She understands her life and what it means to be human and The Slayer. Her quest is ended. (*The Gift*. S5E22).

BUFFY: “Dawn listen to me. Listen. I love you. I’ll always love you. But this is the work I have to do. Tell Giles I... I figured it out. And I’m okay.”

CONCLUSION

There is an ambiguity to the use of the word, *Gift* – the Slayer is gifted at death. She was created to be Death to the vampires and demons. The Slayer has all the attributes she needs to carry out that purpose efficiently and effectively.

Each time Buffy goes to fight, there is a chance she will be killed. This is her duty, a gift she gives to others to protect them and allow them to get on with their lives, she does the things they cannot. This gift is given in secret, her identity is not known, her activities are carried out at night, in the darkness, against the darkness. This is a secret gift, given anonymously. This is the second aspect of her relationship with Death.

Finally, a gift is also something that is given from one to another freely and without need for recompense. Buffy dies freely and willingly to save the world, to save Dawn and to save her friends. She knows death is final and there will be no recompense. She gives the world the gift of sacrifice, her final gift.

The episode for Season 5's finale is aptly named, *The Gift* and brings Buffy's quest to an end. Buffy's quest to learn about her slayer powers and origins also leads her to her greatest gift, her own death as sacrifice to save the world from Glory, and unspeakable evil. This is the true nature of her quest. The questor sets out to learn, or to find or to save. Buffy completes her quest, she learns her true nature and she finds her true self and she saves those she loves. Her true nature is to love and her true self is in her willingness to die to protect those she loves; and she saves the world – again.

Buffy is the pretty blonde the vampires are afraid of. She is The Slayer, and she is Death. She is truly the thing the monsters have nightmares about. (*The Gift*. S5E22)

TEEN BOY: How did you...do that?
BUFFY: It's what I do.
TEEN BOY: But... you're just a girl...
BUFFY: That's what I keep saying.

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