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Buffy vs. Bakhtin: Carnival and Dialogism in the Buffyverse

To be understood he requires an essential reconstruction of our entire artistic and ideological perception, the renunciation of many deeply rooted demands of literary taste, and the revision of many concepts (Bakhtin 1965, 3).

“He” might refer to Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, except that Mikhail Bakhtin wrote this more than 30 years before Whedon was born. Instead, Bakhtin is describing François Rabelais, a medieval French friar and priest, author of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, whom Bakhtin cites as the greatest chronicler of the medieval carnival. Bakhtin uses Rabelais as a starting point to examine the fundamentals of the carnival, to trace its history from antiquity to modern times, and to focus on the essential relationship of carnival with the human spirit.

Bakhtin drew upon carnival theory and existing critical analyses, as well as other sources such as Menippean satires^{1,2} and Socratic dialogs, in his analysis of Dostoevsky’s narrative structure. Bakhtin writes that Dostoevsky

often divined how a given idea would develop and function under certain changed conditions, what unexpected directions it would take . . . Dostoevsky placed the idea on the borderline of dialogically intersecting consciousnesses. He brought together ideas and worldviews, which in real life were absolutely estranged and deaf to one another, and forced them to quarrel (Bakhtin 1984, 91).

Bakhtin’s theory of Dostoevsky’s narrative art defies any simple label or explanation. Bakhtin himself used a number of words or phrases such as “polyphonic narrative,” “multivoicedness,” and “dialogism” to describe “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and

¹ Menippean forms are based on man’s inability to know and contain his fate. To any vision of a completed system of truth, the menippea suggests some element outside the system. Seriocomic forms present a challenge, open or covert, to literary and intellectual orthodoxy, a challenge that is reflected not only in their philosophic content but also in their structure and language (Bakhtin 1984, 106-107; the translator is quoting Philip Holland, 1979).

² Menippean satire exercised a very great influence on old Christian literature (of the ancient period) and on Byzantine literature (and through it, on ancient Russian writing as well) . . . Menippean satire became one of the main carriers and channels for the carnival sense of the world in literature . . . (Bakhtin 1984, 113).

consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” which Bakhtin calls the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels (Bakhtin 1984, 6).

Buffy the Vampire Slayer and *Angel* cross many genres, but their primary genre is horror, simply because that’s where the metaphors are usually based. In turn, those horror metaphors are generally created through use of the grotesque, which gives us a direct connection to Bakhtin’s carnival theory. If carnival aspects can be found in every episode, is the Buffyverse itself a single, grand carnival?

Parody, which is an essential aspect of carnival as well as of dialogism, provides a starting point for understanding Whedon’s use of metaphor. Add to this an understanding of heroes in both carnivalistic and dialogic contexts, and we see a new perspective on the nature and usage of ambiguity in the Buffyverse.

Bakhtin’s concepts of carnival, polyphony, and dialogism provide fascinating insights into the ways that Joss Whedon’s characters and stories connect with us, both individually and as a culture. Other writers (Wilcox 132-145; Sherman; Wisker; Battis) have used Bakhtin’s carnival theory to focus on specific aspects of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I believe that Whedon’s use of carnival runs much deeper, encompassing the entire Buffyverse as a carnival filled with “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices.”

The Whedonian Carnival

To read Rabelais without a “guidebook” is much like wandering into a bar and finding yourself seated at a table with Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill, who set out to drink you under the table while filling your head with the most improbable tales. First exposure to *Buffy* or *Angel* can leave one drunk on words and images, staggering with revelations about the characters . . . and yes, filled with the most improbable tales.

These improbable tales follow patterns, though, and one pattern is the medieval carnival. Bakhtin describes the key elements of carnival: life, participation, linkage with the holy and spiritual, renewal, and laughter based on folk culture. While we examine each of these aspects individually, we must also understand that carnival aspects rarely stand alone; there is nearly always parody or the grotesque to be found close by.

Life: “Date, Shop, Hang Out, Go to School, and Save the World”

“It belongs on the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play” (Bakhtin 1965, 7).

Joss Whedon has always been very clear about his use of the horror genre as a source of metaphors for real life. Without going into an extensive (and probably unnecessary) review of this area, the key point here is that the world of the Buffyverse is the same as the world of the carnival, which in turn is our own world: our schools, businesses, sporting events, churches, restaurants, taverns, streets, and homes. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, carnival merges with suburbia, and carnival events merge with the events of modern daily life—dances, parent-teacher meetings, shopping, dating, and the occasional witch- and book-burning.

Participation: “We Saved The World; I Say We Party”

“Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all of the people” (Bakhtin 1965, 7).

The participatory aspect of carnival is crucial in *Buffy*. Before Buffy, all Slayers acted alone and in secret. In Sunnydale, Buffy sheds her secret and her isolation on her first day of school, and the Scooby Gang begins to form. By the end of the two-part series opener, she’s prevented an apocalypse intended to raise the dead, and she’s done it in the Bronze, which for most of the series is the Sunnydale equivalent of a public square and tavern. (More on “The Harvest” as we discuss parody and the cycle of death and rebirth.)

Many of Buffy’s greatest successes as a Slayer are directly dependent on participation. In “Prophecy Girl,” “Innocence,” and “Becoming,” she relies on the whole Scooby Gang. In “Graduation Day,” she recruits the entire senior class. In “Primeval,” the Scoobies merge into a single consciousness and being. In “Grave,” it is not Buffy who saves the world; instead, she must let go of her mission and allow her friends to do it for her. In “Chosen,” she makes a Slayer out of every Potential, and breaks the paradigm of isolation forever. In “Damage,” we see Slayers continuing to act as a community.

As Bakhtin says, “Carnival is not a spectacle to be seen by the people.” Or by Watchers, if Buffy has anything to say about it. From “Welcome to the Hellmouth” to “Helpless” to “Who Are You?” to “Checkpoint,” Buffy taunts her own Watchers and the Watchers Council: “You’re Watchers. Without a Slayer, you’re pretty much just watchin’ *Masterpiece Theater*.” And, “The boy has clocked more field time than all of you combined.”

When Buffy is withdrawing from those close to her, she vacillates between telling people that running is the right thing to do, and showing no respect for those won’t participate. The latter is a risky choice, because Buffy is no longer participating as an equal: “During carnival there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men.” (Bakhtin 1965, 15) It gets her into serious trouble in “Empty Places.” Bakhtin again: “Everyone participates, because its very idea embraces all the people.”

Spike perceives exactly what participation means to Buffy. In his first appearance, “School Hard,” he says, “A Slayer with family and friends. That sure as hell wasn’t in the brochure.” Later, in “Fool for Love,” he tells Buffy outright, “The only reason you’ve lasted as long as you have is you’ve got ties to the world . . . your mum, your brat kid sister, the Scoobies. They all tie you here but you’re just putting off the inevitable.”

Linkage With the Holy and Spiritual: “A Degradation Most Holy”

“All these forms of carnival were also linked externally to the feasts of the Church” (Bakhtin 1965, 8).

Bakhtin describes an extensive catalog of parodical liturgies, gospels, prayers, litanies, wills, epitaphs, decrees, and more (Bakhtin 1965, 14). So the occurrence of religious parody in the Buffyverse coincides perfectly with the carnival tradition.

The most obvious is the Master's Order of Aurelius, an existential mockery of Christianity housed in a buried church under Sunnydale. The Order is rich in tradition, ritual, and prophecy, with apocalyptic visions of world conquest and an "Anointed One" who will lead the way. When the vampire Luke describes the Harvest as "a degradation most holy," he uses the word degradation in a purely carnivalistic sense: "to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something better . . . Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one" (Bakhtin 1965, 21).

They're not alone; many other demon species and tribes have their own rituals, such as the thrall demon and its worshipers in "Dear Boy." Even gods appear from time to time, such as Glory and Yeska. The "Powers That Be" strongly resemble the gods of Olympus,³ and the hierarchy of demons includes both higher beings as well as lower beings such as the order of vengeance demons.⁴

Magic spells often include an appeal to the goddesses. Willow even takes the names of the goddesses in vain: "For the love of Hecate, somebody stop me" ("Orpheus").

Whedon indulges frequently in carnivalistic parodies of holidays, whether they are religious, secular or personal. The list is impressive.

Birthdays: Buffy has a string of horrible birthdays ("Innocence," "Helpless," "A New Man," "Blood Ties," "Older and Far Away"). Tara's family shows up for her birthday to abduct her ("Family"). Cordelia has a vision that nearly kills her, and escapes death only by becoming a demon ("Birthday").

Halloween: Episodes include "Halloween," "Fear Itself," "All The Way," "Life of the Party," and "The Cautionary Tale of Numero Cinco" which is based on the Mexican Day of the Dead, or All Souls Day.

Other holidays: Parodied holidays include Thanksgiving ("Pangs"), Christmas ("Amends"), and Valentine's Day ("Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered").

Numerous episodes include scenes in churches or other holy sites, such as Spike's healing of Drusilla ("What's My Line" part 2), the Buffy/Faith fight in "Who Are You?", Buffy slaying a vampire in a convent (then trying on a wimple, in "Triangle"), Buffy's dream of marrying Angel, where they walk out of the church into sunlight and Buffy bursts into flames ("The Prom"), Spike's confession of having a soul ("Beneath You"), and Cordelia lying in state in a cathedral after giving birth to Jasmine ("Peace Out").

Nor can we forget nearly a dozen apocalypses (yes, Riley, there is a plural).

³ Bakhtin describes Olympus as "clearly carnivalistic: free familiarization, scandals and eccentricities, crownings and decrownings . . ." (Bakhtin 1984, 133)

⁴ Bakhtin notes the "consistent carnivalization of the nether world" (Bakhtin 1984, 133). Rabelais goes further to describe devils as "damned good drinking friends." (Rabelais, 224)

Renewal: “I Remember the Drill: One Slayer Dies, Next One’s Called”

“Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” (Bakhtin 1965, 10).

Although renewal is closely tied to the grotesque, it’s worth considering separately because it lies at the core of both carnival and Slayer lore. Renewal may take a number of forms, from ritual crowning and decrowning, to death and rebirth, and change of many kinds.

Renewal is especially important in the Slayer mythology because death and rebirth is the central fact of each Slayer’s existence. With a catch: rebirth happens to someone else, another young girl whose life will be brutal and short. When Buffy’s friends cheat the cycle of death and renewal, it opens the way for the First Evil.

Whedon isn’t stingy with the rebirth metaphor. Buffy dies twice. Angel gets sent to hell, and loses his soul twice (three times, counting his backstory). Darla is staked, reborn as a human, chooses to become a vampire again, and finally stakes herself to give birth to Connor. Spike gets chipped (worse than death for a vampire), seeks out his soul, then dies and is reborn first as a ghost, then as flesh-and-blood again. Fred is reborn as Illyria. Doyle’s visions are reborn in Cordelia. Cordelia first becomes a demon (as an alternative to death and daytime TV), then becomes a Higher Power—after that things get muddy, as she returns to human form, gives birth to Jasmine, and dies again, leaving her Higher Power self free to move on. Anya goes back and forth between human and demon, finally dying as a human. Lorne is hacked to pieces in Pylea, then brought back to wholeness. Adam is a living being created from pieces of dead bodies.

Have we gotten the message yet? To change, something must die; this is the price of becoming. Sometimes the death is symbolic, as when Buffy sends Angel to hell, and must pass through hell herself in order to return to her life (“Anne”). Chanterelle (also known as Lily, and Anne) sheds names as well as identities as she searches for herself. Oz goes on a great journey to control his werewolf side, and fails only when he returns to his starting point. Wesley’s throat is cut as he betrays Angel, and he gives his own blood back to Angel as part of his penance. As part of the price for her power, Willow first kills Warren, then becomes him. And so it goes.

Both series also go through carnivalistic renewals. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* changes as Buffy herself grows; the series re-invents itself with graduation from high school, and again as Buffy drops out of college life to take on adult responsibilities. *Angel* is reborn from its dark underground lair into the abandoned Hyperion hotel, bringing the hotel back to life. Three years later, Wolfram & Hart offers a deal, and Angel Investigations signs on, eyes wide open.

Laughter: “I’m a Blood-sucking Fiend! Look at My Outfit!”

“Let us enlarge upon the second important trait of the people’s festive laughter: that it is also directed at those who laugh” (Bakhtin 1965, 12).

Carnival laughter tends to one of four forms: grotesque, abusive words and insults, body humor, and parody.

The Grotesque: “Eww, What Does This Do?”

Crowning and decrowning may be portrayed as a *tearing to pieces*, as a typical carnivalistic “sacrificial” dismemberment into partsSuch enumerations [of body parts] were a widespread comic device in the carnivalized literature of the Renaissance. (Bakhtin 1984, 162).

The Buffyverse abounds with dismemberments. The Judge is perhaps the most memorable, arriving in Sunnydale in elaborate and beautiful wooden boxes, but departing after being blown apart by an anti-tank missile. The scene in “Innocence” with the Scoobies picking up pieces and demon body parts in a shopping mall is a perfect image of medieval grotesque.⁵ Other dismemberments may be less ritualistic, but still are frequently played for humor, as in this scene from “Epiphany”:

Angel: “How do I kill them?”

Wesley: “Well, uhm, there are a number of ways . . .”

One of the Skilosh tackles Angel away from Wesley and knocks him into the wall.

Angel: “Wesley!”

Wesley: “Yeah, right, yes, uh, ah,” (the other Skilosh grabs Wesley by the neck) “hack it to pieces!”

Demon blood and gore are frequently colorful; Skilosh blood is thick and bright yellow, like filling for a lemon meringue pie.

As Bakhtin notes, “The grotesque image never had such a canon. It is non-canonical by its very nature” (Bakhtin 1965, 30). This open-endedness allows Whedon great latitude not only in creating grotesque characters and images, but also in the way he incorporates them into the story. Whedon borrows from the classics (vampires, zombies, werewolves, Dracula, Frankenstein), sometimes playing them straight but more often turning the canon inside out.

Whedon also creates his own grotesques, both as “straight” demons (not always evil) and as a variety of freakish humans. Lorne, the empath demon, joins Angel Investigations. Merl, the lizard demon, works as a snitch. Gwen Raiden, the human with the electrifying touch, uses her “gift” as a thief and a con-artist. We never know the background of the fez-wearing skull-less man who can tap into Cordelia’s visions. So it goes; virtually every episode creates some new twist on the grotesque. There is no grotesque canon that constrains Whedon’s creativity.

In the grotesque world the *id* is uncrowned and transformed into a “funny monster.” When entering this new dimension, even if it is

⁵ The Judge is a grotesque parody of a vengeful God. His death brings about renewal in the form of saving the world. There is humor both in the way he is killed (“no weapon forged”) and in the Scoobies picking up his pieces, especially in Cordelia’s revulsion and Buffy’s flippant “Best present ever.” It takes place in a modern marketplace under the cleansing “rain” of the sprinkler system. All of the Scoobies participate in the plan. It’s a carnival story worthy of Rabelais himself.

Romantic, we always experience a peculiar gay freedom of thought and imagination (Bakhtin 1965, 49).

This uncrowning of the *id* is marvelously carried out with one of Whedon's great villains. Glory is the pure *id* of a selfish, unruly child, elevated to the level of hellgod. If a two-year-old could be god, Glory is what you'd get. The Mayor is a different kind of psychological grotesque, unrestrained ego with more than a touch of Nietzsche (Schudt, 28-29).

While the core of Whedon's grotesque is based on medieval and Renaissance grotesque traditions, he is very much aware of the evolution of the grotesque in more recent literature.

Romantic grotesque . . . was a reaction against the elements of classicism which characterized the self-importance of the Enlightenment. It was a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism. Unlike the medieval and Renaissance grotesque . . . the Romantic genre acquired a private "chamber" character. It became, as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation. The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy. It ceased to be the concrete (one might say bodily) . . . However, the most important transformation of Romantic grotesque was that of the principle of laughter. This element of course remained, since no grotesque, even the most timid, is conceivable in the atmosphere of absolute seriousness. But laughter was cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be a joyful and triumphant hilarity. Its positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum (Bakhtin 1965, 37-38).

Whedon takes on the Romantic grotesque in season four of *Buffy* when he re-invents the story of Frankenstein. Like Frankenstein's monster, Adam is the result of cold rationalism and logical authoritarianism run amuck. Unlike previous "big bads," there is little about Adam that is remotely funny, either in his own humor, which is coldly ironic to an extreme, or in the havoc he wreaks. Adam's appearance brings the Initiative down into chaos, and in particular, he undercuts everything that Riley knew about his place in the world ("Goodbye Iowa" and "Primeval"). Buffy has no verbal banter to spare for her fights with Adam.

Buffy says a final goodbye to the Romantic grotesque with her slaying of Dracula, after which she returns to her Slayer roots, taking up her studies with Giles again, and discovering the origins of her sister Dawn.

Giles, too, can carry aspects of the Romantic grotesque; as a Watcher, he is usually an observer rather than a participant. His own humor tends towards sarcasm and irony, especially rhetorical irony, or "finite irony" (Sheinberg 34-35), whose purpose is to satirize. This is particularly true during the entire period with Adam and the Initiative, when Giles has neither employment nor his "job" as Buffy's Watcher.

As Bakhtin further notes,

The world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure (Bakhtin 1965, 38).

The First, in season seven of *Buffy*, is the essence of this “terrifying” and “alien” grotesque. We never experience the First directly; we only see and hear it indirectly, usually through its manifestations as people who have died, or through its emissary, the misogynistic de-frocked priest Caleb. “From beneath you, it devours” we hear in *Buffy*’s dreams,⁶ from D’Hoffryn, or (mistranslated) from Andrew, who has been haunted by the First appearing as Warren Mears. The First is the most nihilistic of the *Buffyverse* villains (compared to the Mayor or to Jasmine, that’s saying a lot); all the First wants is to destroy and to corrupt. *Buffy* is able to defeat the First only when she returns to the roots of carnival: fearless, laughing, sharing her power, taking part fully in all aspects of life.

As a closing note on the grotesque, some final thoughts on that word “fearless.” Bakhtin says this about Rabelais:

[T]he images of folk culture are absolutely fearless and communicate this fearlessness to all. This is also true of Renaissance literature. The high point of this spirit is reached in Rabelais’ novel; here fear is destroyed at its very origin and everything is turned into gaiety. It is the most fearless book in world literature (Bakhtin 1965, 38).

This is absolutely true. In *Gargantua and Pantegruel* (Rabelais), there is no fear. Fear is simply not a concept that fits within its world of carnival. One metaphor that underlies the book is that of giants in the world; Gargantua and Pantegruel are literally giants of immense proportion, appetite, and courage. If they learn of a problem afflicting the men in their world, they go about solving it, with as much food, drink, wenching, and merriment as they can manage. It never occurs to them that there is anything in the world to be afraid of. They are inseparably part of the carnival of their times.

In a similar way, *Buffy* and *Angel* are giants in our world, larger than life in spirit and deed if not in stature.

⁶ In reference to *Crime and Punishment*, Bakhtin puts *Buffy*’s prophetic dreams squarely in the realm of the carnival: “This . . . dream logic made it possible to create here the image of a *laughing murdered old woman, to combine laughter with death and murder*. But this is also made possible by the ambivalent logic of carnival.” (Bakhtin 1984, 168)

Abusive Words and Insults: “Welcome To the Nancy Tribe”

“It is characteristic for the familiar speech of the marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex” (Bakhtin 1965, 16).

“Slayer slang” has been thoroughly analyzed in terms of language. (Adams) The important issues here are not so much lexicography or etymology. Instead, we want to look at the use of language from a carnival perspective.

Few aspects of Buffy are more iconic than her ritual trash-talking during slaying. How many episodes open in cemeteries with some variation of a ritual slaying accompanied by puns? The series plays with this iconography in various ways to set up story lines, such as Buffy being staked by a vampire in “Fool For Love,” Buffy’s ennui in “Conversations With Dead People,” or the perfectly iconic slaying that opens “The Gift”—an episode that ends with Buffy’s death.

When Buffy is absent from Sunnydale, the Scoobies notice the absence of wordplay. In “Anne,” Xander notes, “In a way, I feel like we took her punning for granted.” In “Bargaining,” Willow programs the Buffybot for puns and jokes, but ends up with word salad: “That’ll put marzipan in your pie plate, bingo!”

Whedon plays iconoclast⁷ with his own icons, as well as with the iconography of the horror genre. Nearly every major character faces a parodic double at some point (more on this doubling below). Lorne and Spike shower Angel with a constant stream of nicknames, such as “Pumpkin” and “Angelcakes” (Lorne, in “Unleashed”), to “General Grumpyants” (Spike, in “The Cautionary Tale of Numero Cinco”) and “Captain Forehead” (Spike, in “Just Rewards”).

Giles is also a font of insults, towards Spike (“You’ll do what? Lick me to death?” from “Something Blue”), toward Wesley (“Well, thank God you’re here. I was planning to panic.” From “Bad Girls”), but often towards the Scoobies: “I’m so very sorry. My contrition completely dwarfs the impending apocalypse.” (“Doomed”) Spike mocks Giles with “Did your life pass before your eyes? Cuppa tea, cuppa tea, almost got shagged, cuppa tea?” (“Bargaining”)

Vampires and demons are just as willing to partake in wordplay. Sunday is merciless towards Buffy in “The Freshman,” reversing the iconic Buffy trash-talk slaying. In “Prophecy Girl,” the Master toys with Buffy verbally before killing her, then as he drops her face-down in a pool of muddy water, says, “And by the way, I like your dress.”

The Lower Bodily Stratum: “I’m All For Spurdy Knowledge”

“The lower bodily stratum” is Bakhtin’s catch-phrase for food, drink, genitals, copulation, conception, pregnancy, birth, defecation, and the grave. While the medium of network television places some limits on this, there’s no absence of the physical in either humorous or symbolic modes. As Willow says enthusiastically about starting college, “But here, the energy, the

⁷ The term “iconoclast” originates from the practice of the Russian monk Nikon, who fought for religious reform by (among other things) confiscating icons belonging to opposing schisms, gouging the eyes out of the painted figures, and parading them through Moscow. (Billington, 134) Whedon’s iconoclasm is often just as direct.

collective intelligence, it's like this force, this penetrating force, and I can just feel my mind opening up—you know?—and letting this place thrust into and spurt knowledge into . . . That sentence ended up in a different place than it started out in" ("The Freshman").

Aside from any abusive language or insults, the lower bodily stratum finds its way into the language of Buffy. Dawn says that a burger was "like a meat party in my mouth." ("Wrecked") Willow chooses a piece of fried chicken and says, "I'm a breast girl myself. But, then again, you knew that." ("Life Serial") Anya sings about how Xander's "penis got diseases from a Chumash tribe!" ("Once More With Feeling")

Imagery is not confined to words. As Dawn notices in one of Giles's books, "That's a weird place for a horn." Then, quietly, "That's not a horn." ("Flooded") Cordelia is impregnated by a demon. ("Expecting") If an Ano-movic demon marries a woman who has previously been married, then his family eats the previous husband—with his permission, of course. ("Bachelor Party") And who could forget the penis-demon from "Doublemeat Palace"? Not Buffy or Willow, certainly.

Obviously, vampire lore is rooted in the lower bodily stratum, with blood-drinking—"It's like a whole big sucking thing." ("Welcome to the Hellmouth")—throat-biting, siring, the period of death before rising, and living in crypts and other underground haunts. Whedon adds his own creations to vampire lore, notably with Darla giving birth to a living son, Connor.

The mask is another theme in folk culture related to the grotesque: "The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself" (Bakhtin 1965, 39).

The primary use of masks in the Buffyverse is in the vampire's "game face." As Giles tells Buffy, "A vampire appears to be completely normal until the feed is upon them, only then do they reveal their true demonic visage." ("Welcome to the Hellmouth") For vampires, at least, it is a joyous moment, very often accompanied by some joyous verbal or physical outburst. Darla, Drusilla, and Spike excel in this expression of life and desire, as does Angelus when Angel's soul has been removed. If this is an evil joy, it is also certainly a joy of lust for the "lower bodily stratum." This lust is perfectly portrayed when Drusilla kills William the "bloody awful poet" in "Fool For Love." It is just as brilliantly parodied in "Sleeper" when Anya is poised to bite Spike's neck during a feigned seduction that neither of them wants.

Parody: "Eurotrashed!"

According to Esti Sheinberg, parody is a specific type of irony composed of two incongruent layers, both of which are taken from pre-existing cultural contexts. Parody tends to be regarded as a device for satirization or alienation, but it can also be used as a structural device. Parody is satirical if the author points to one layer as the preferred meaning, but may be non-satirical if neither layer is exaggerated or distorted, so that the irony is inherent in the structure and the resulting clash of style and content (Sheinberg 142-149).

Carnival parody is inherently satirical and exaggerated, but what we see in the Buffyverse is much different. If one thinks of parody in structural terms, then Whedon's metaphors are clearly parodical: medieval grotesque as one layer, with modern daily life as the other layer. By its

nature, Whedon's grotesque is exaggerated, but not more or less so than in classic horror genre works. Daily life is exactly what we know: jobs, school, relationships. So when Joyce tells Buffy, "I know. If you don't go out it'll be the end of the world. Everything is life or death when you're a sixteen-year-old girl," the humor is inherent in the stylistic clash. Just like the book says it should be!

It's more complicated than that, of course. Whedon loves both his characters and his monsters, so that even with his most biting satire, laughter is "directed at those who laugh," including Whedon, and including us.

More subtly, Whedon acknowledges the changing nature of the grotesque over the centuries. Whedon seems very comfortable with a medieval- and renaissance-style grotesque:

It must be recalled that the image of death in medieval and Renaissance grotesque . . . is a more or less funny monstrosity. In the ages that followed, especially in the nineteenth century, the public at large almost completely forgot the principle of laughter presented in macabre images. They were interpreted in an unrelieved, serious aspect and became flat and distorted (Bakhtin 1965, 50-51).

One can trace this difference from the Master's medieval grotesque to the First's nihilistic grotesque. This in itself is a structural parody within the Buffyverse. Buffy makes these subtle judgments herself; when she rejects Dracula's advances ("How do you like my darkness now?") and slays him, she reduces an iconic terror of the Romantic grotesque to the status of an ordinary, and comic, vampire.

Carnival and Heroes

Carnivalistic legends in general are profoundly different from traditional heroicizing epic legends: carnivalistic legends debase the hero and bring him down to earth, they make him familiar, bring him close, humanize him; ambivalent carnival laughter burns away all that is stilted and stiff, but in no way destroys the heroic core of the image (Bakhtin 1984, 132-133).

I will have more to say about heroism later, but now is a good time to summarize from a carnivalistic perspective. Whedon certainly debases and degrades his heroes; both Buffy and Angel have died, been buried, spent time in hell, and have been reborn. In this process, they truly became "something more and better." Whedon familiarizes us with his heroes by showing us their daily lives as well as their heroic exploits. They are human because we know the depths of their pain, and we experience their failures as well as their accomplishments. We become intimate with their self-doubt, their weaknesses, their denials. And yes, we laugh at them, from puppet-Angel to cave-Buffy. Angel loses his soul through having sex with Buffy. Through all of their trials, Whedon's heroes grow stronger, but they also become more human.

The Many Voices of Joss Whedon

One of the extraordinary characteristics of Whedon's work is the number and variety of characters who seem to be fully alive, full of independent viewpoints and capable of action. This is not necessarily attributable to either the variety of talented writers, nor to the exceptionally capable ensemble cast. Other great television series have achieved remarkable characterizations without achieving this level of independent, self-aware, and self-motivated characters. One such series is *The West Wing*, where the driving force is the Bartlet presidency. Aaron Sorkin used Jed Bartlet to establish a monologic narrative framework, and all the characters are constrained within that framework. In *Hill Street Blues*, Steven Bochco uses the narrative framework of an inner-city police precinct to create a singular monologic viewpoint that encompasses all of his characters.

What makes Joss Whedon's work different? Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky provides a number of insights. Whedon's characters seem to be fully self-aware; they act on their own motivations and seem to be independent of any authorial viewpoint. Whedon, like Dostoevsky, maintains an authorial distance from all his characters that is key to allowing all of them to be fully formed.⁸

Another crucial similarity is that Whedon's characters are constantly evolving and changing—"that internally unfinalizable something in man." (Bakhtin 1984, 58) In Whedon's work, as in Dostoevsky, "[the] hero always seeks to destroy that framework of *other people's* words about him that might finalize and deaden him" (Bakhtin 1984, 59). This is a core aspect of Buffy's journey as a reluctant Slayer who masters her fate by sharing it. It is also a core aspect of the journey of redemption, highlighted in the journeys of Angel, Faith, Spike, Willow, Wesley, and others.

That "unfinalizable something" is an idea. Each idea is inseparable from the character who possesses (and is possessed by) that idea. This idea "is not a character, not a temperament, not a social or psychological type; such externalized and finalized images of persons cannot of course be combined with the image of a *fully valid* idea" (Bakhtin 1984, 85). This "idea" grows or dies in direct relationship to dialogue:

The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters the genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of *others* . . . At that point of contact between voice-consciousnesses the idea is born and lives (Bakhtin 1984, 88).

⁸ In discussing authorial intent, I treat Joss Whedon as the author in all cases, even though many episodes of both series were written by an exceptionally talented writing staff. According to many accounts, specifically from those writers, Whedon wrote far more than he took credit for, including final edits on all scripts. He also broke the stories for each season. It's fair to say that these series are his creation, and to give him credit for the narrative structure as well as for the characters.

Both series end on a characteristic line of unfinalized dialog: “Yeah, Buffy. What are we gonna do now?” (“Chosen”) and “Well, personally, I kind of want to slay the dragon. Let’s go to work.” (“Not Fade Away”) As Bakhtin suggests of Dostoevsky’s endings,

The catharsis that finalizes Dostoevsky’s novels might be—of course inadequately and somewhat rationalistically—expressed in this way: *nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.*

But this is, after all, the *purifying sense* of ambivalent laughter (Bakhtin 1984, 166).

The foundation for this dialogic expression and growth of ideas is the polyphonic narrative, so that is the first area to explore.

Characteristics of Polyphonic Narrative

Bakhtin distinguishes between a traditional monologic narrative and a polyphonic narrative along two primary axes: the authorial viewpoint and narrative, and the character’s viewpoint and narrative. He argues that in a monologic structure, these are either the same, or they are closely dependent. Either a single main character represents the author, or the author’s viewpoint is tied to the narration. All characters exist and act within this context.

Bakhtin credits Dostoevsky with the creation of the polyphonic novel, a novel with “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices.” Curiously, he outlines the characteristics of the polyphonic novel in terms of evolving critical understanding of this “fundamentally new novelistic genre” (Bakhtin 1984, 7). This list serves for examining Whedon’s use of polyphony as well.

Separation of a Character From the Whole

Vyacheslav Ivanov defined Dostoevsky’s realism as a realism based on “penetration”—the need for each character

[T]o affirm someone else’s “I” not as an object but as another subject . . . a task that . . . must be accomplished if they are to overcome their ethical solipsism, their disunited idealistic consciousness, and transform the other person from a shadow into an authentic reality . . . at the heart of the tragic catastrophe in Dostoevsky’s work there always lies the solipsistic separation of a character’s consciousness from the whole, his incarceration in his own private world (Bakhtin 1984, 10).

This “solipsistic separation” and self-incarceration would make an interesting, if not particularly unusual, villain. However, the point is that it occurs in all characters, not just the occasional sociopath. Perhaps Angel’s worst flaw is his brooding, inward focus that cuts him off from

everyone around him. Buffy's tendency towards pulling back from her friends is rooted in her awareness of the ways that Slayer status impacts her life.

Once we become aware of this as a structural aspect, though, we can see it in others. Willow sees much of the world through her own self-esteem issues and her need for control. Xander is intensely aware of his lack of superpowers compared to his friends. Cordelia is wrapped up in her elite status, and maintains her defenses accordingly.

Freedom and Independence of a Character

Sergei Askoldov described Dostoevsky's characters as personalities.

Personality, according to Askoldov, differs from character, type, and temperament—which ordinarily serve as the object of representation in literature—because of its extraordinary internal freedom and its utter independence from the external environment (Bakhtin 1984, 11-12).

This freedom and independence takes a number of forms. At a modest level, these traits are visible in the Buffyverse when it becomes more apparent that characters have pasts. Willow and Xander have a friendship that goes back at least ten years. Buffy has been a Slayer before coming to Sunnydale. Angel and Spike have a long history and rivalry. Wesley is able to survive his catastrophic tenure as Watcher, and goes on to become a respected demon researcher as well as fighter.

It is critically important, too, that characters have the room to err and fail on their own. It is not merely that Buffy and Angel sometimes stray from their path. Other characters look at similar paths and back away: Anya never risks setting out for redemption for her millennium as a vengeance demon. Angel gives Lindsey a chance to leave Wolfram & Hart to find redemption, but he gives in to the temptations of wealth and power.

As Angel tells Faith, "It's all about choices, Faith. The ones we make, and the ones we don't. Oh, and the consequences." ("Release") For choices and consequences to be believable and meaningful, to us as viewers, the character's choices and failures have to be believable. We can never get even a hint that the writer has made the choice for them.

Merging of Opposites

Leonid Grossman was the first critic to recognize

[T]he distinguishing trait of Dostoevsky's poetics in his violation of that organic unity of material required by the usual canon, his joining together of the most varied and incompatible elements in the unity of novelistic construction, and in his destruction of the unified and integral fabric of narration (Bakhtin 1984, 14).

This restructuring of narrative allowed Dostoevsky to merge carnival elements such as parody, street scenes, and the grotesque into religious and ethical discourse.

“Violation of organic unity required by canon” is very much a matter of perspective. For one thing, that statement makes the assumption that “organic unity” can be externally imposed. For Joss Whedon, as with Dostoevsky, the unity comes from within. Whedon’s “varied and incompatible elements” include crossing of genres, deliberate violation of genre canons, parody, and more. Unity comes from character growth, and from interactions between those incompatible elements. These interactions and incompatibilities lie at the core of Buffy’s dilemma of being the reluctant Slayer, as well as creating the key conflict underlying the struggle for redemption that we see in so many of Whedon’s characters. Angel’s question, “Am I a thing worth saving?” (“Amends”) could easily be asked in *Crime and Punishment* or *The Brothers Karamazov*.⁹

With regard to Dostoevsky, Bakhtin states that these disparate elements are beyond both style and tone; they are

distributed among several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses; they are presented not within a single field of vision but within several fields of vision, each full and of equal worth . . . (Bakhtin 1984, 16).

So it is with Joss Whedon. We see Whedon’s world from many perspectives, but this is not a trick of narrative viewpoint. It is not even a narrative at all, in the usual (monologic) sense. It makes far more sense from a perspective of multiple narratives, each from a different character’s viewpoint. These backstories even spread across dimensions, with some dimensions (with or without shrimp) serving as parodic doubles. Beljox’s Eye (“Showtime”) sees across dimensions, although it really doesn’t have anything new to tell Giles and Anya. Wolfram & Hart positions itself across dimensions, taking whatever form it needs in order to do its work. Jasmine has made previous attempts to conquer entire worlds. The First seems to have no need of a home dimension or world, even though it lusts for the feel of having its own flesh.

Plurality of Equally Authoritative Ideological Positions

Otto Kaus recognized that Dostoevsky

concentrated in himself so many utterly contradictory and mutually exclusive concepts, judgments, and evaluations . . . but most astonishing is the fact that Dostoevsky’s works justify as it were all these contradictory points of view: every one of them really does find support for itself in Dostoevsky’s novels (Bakhtin 1984, 18).¹⁰

⁹ “Am I a thing worth saving?” was a fundamental question of Dostoevsky’s own life. In 1849, Dostoevsky was arrested for belonging to a secret anarchist organization, and sentenced to death. He was given his reprieve less than a minute before he was due to be executed. He served more than four years in prison, and was exiled from Petersburg for ten years. (Dostoevsky, xii-xiii)

¹⁰ Bakhtin also quotes Kaus’s description of Dostoevsky, and it sounds remarkably like Lorne, the Host of Caritas: “a host who gets on marvelously with the most motley guests, who is able to command the attention of the most ill-assorted company and can hold all in an equal state of suspense.” (Bakhtin 1984, 18)

“Astonishing” is perhaps too strong a word; Giles found the love between a vampire and a Slayer to be “poetic! In a maudlin sort of way.” (“Out of Mind, Out of Sight”) Whedon builds these contradictory viewpoints into his characters and their conflicts. Angel embodies both human and demon; as Angel he fights demons, but as Angelus he fights humans. Spike and Oz each struggle with that same duality. In a world of magic and monsters, Joyce’s death due to natural causes is the hardest for everyone to accept. Ben is a doctor because he knows all too well the destruction that Glory wreaks. It’s not the contradictions that are astonishing, but the many ways that Whedon makes them work.

While Kaus accepts the “multivoicedness” of Dostoevsky, he does not follow this into the question of structural unity. To understand polyphony and dialogism in Whedon’s work, we have to go there.

Unity Based on Character and Time Rather Than Plot

Bakhtin notes V. Komarovich’s recognition of the polyphonic structure of Dostoevsky, but in terms of the contrapuntal voices of a fugue. However, Bakhtin sees Komarovich’s analysis as still bound by a search for unity, rather than an event with autonomous participants (Bakhtin 1984, 21). Bakhtin also notes the limitations of a musical analogy (Bakhtin 1984, 22).

Whedon’s use of character as a unifying element is relatively obvious, but it bears a closer look in this context. One of the ways that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* avoided stagnation, as series, was to reinvent themselves. These reinventions could be rather abrupt, as in *Buffy’s* transition from high school to college: They blew up the school in “Graduation Day,” and in the next episode, Buffy, Willow, and Oz are in college, while Xander lives in his parents’ basement and Giles is unemployed. It’s more than a change in setting; it marks independence from home, Buffy’s “graduation” from the Watchers’ Council, Angel’s departure from Sunnydale, all in a single episode. In *Angel*, the transition from the Hyperion Hotel to running Wolfram & Hart was even more abrupt; Lilah Morgan made the “offer of a lifetime,” and we never saw the hotel again. Character is the only continuity across these changes, given the abrupt changes in setting and themes.

In season six, character provides unity across a more subtle but no less drastic change in *Buffy’s* plot. Prior to this season, Buffy had faced and defeated an increasingly powerful foe each season. But what do you do after defeating a god? Virtually all the characters become their own worst enemies (“Season Six Overview”). Buffy falls into deep depression after being pulled out of the grave, while Willow must face up to her insecurity and need for control over others, and Xander struggles with the legacy of growing up under an abusive, alcoholic father. *Angel Investigations* faces a similar challenge. As they make the transition from the Hyperion to Wolfram & Hart, they also move from defeating Jasmine (apparently one of the “Powers That Be”) to struggling to maintain their own integrity.

To see the unity in time we have to look a little closer, because it’s usually hidden under explosive change. Consider “Becoming”: Kendra dies. Giles is kidnapped and tortured. Willow and Xander are seriously injured. Buffy is expelled from school. Joyce finds out about Buffy being the Slayer, and throws Buffy out of her home. She makes a deal with her mortal enemy, Spike. She kills Angel, knowing that his soul has been restored. Oh yes, she saves the world, too.

All of these things taken together, unified by their nearly simultaneous occurrence, become a crushing blow for Buffy.

We see the same kind of unity in “Tomorrow”: Connor betrays Angel. Cordy ascends to be a higher power. Lorne leaves for Las Vegas. Holtz dies, and Justine finds herself alone. Sahjhan is captured. Fred and Gunn are left behind to run Angel Investigations. It’s a masterpiece of polyphonic narrative, because each of these threads has been developing over the course of the season, and again the unifying element is time, as all these threads break apart in a violent starburst: “. . . the catastrophic swiftness of action, the ‘whirlwind motion,’ the dynamics of Dostoevsky” (Bakhtin 1984, 29).

The same time-based unity occurs on a slightly smaller scale in mid-season episodes as well. In “Lovers Walk” we watch four relationships break at once. In “Conversations With Dead People,” simultaneity provides the only visible unity until we discover the role of the First in the following two episodes.

An Idea Rooted in a Person

Bakhtin cites B. M. Engelhardt as the first to recognize the fundamental change wrought by Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky’s hero is a déclassé member of the intelligentsia, cut off from cultural tradition, from the soil and the earth, a representative of an “accidental tribe.” Such a person enters into special relations with the idea: he is defenseless before it and its power, for he is not rooted in objective reality and is deprived of any cultural tradition. He becomes . . . possessed by an idea . . . The idea leads an independent life in the hero’s consciousness: in fact it is not he but the idea that lives, and the novelist describes not the life of the hero but the life of the idea in him . . . (Bakhtin 1984, 22).

Engelhardt’s words describe the path of redemption equally well. Angel is indeed isolated by his soul, and possessed by his mission to “help the helpless.” The same can be said for others on the redemption path, such as Spike, Faith, and Willow. Buffy finds her “burden of Slayerness” to be overwhelming at times, and it dominates her actions as well as her relationships. Cordelia becomes absorbed into her role as “vision girl.”

In each of these characters, we see not an idea, but a life driven by an idea. We see characters cut off from their “cultural tradition” (that’s such a *polite* way to refer to vampirism). In Angel’s case it is accidental, but in Buffy’s it is often deliberate.

Bakhtin disagrees with other parts of Engelhardt’s analysis, noting that “the idea is present only for the characters, and not for Dostoevsky himself as the author” (Bakhtin 1984, 24). Further,

Dostoevsky’s world is profoundly *pluralistic*. If we were to seek an image . . . in the spirit of Dostoevsky’s own worldview, then it would be the church as a communion of unmerged souls, where

sinner and righteous men come together; or perhaps it would be the image of Dante's world, where multi-leveledness is extended into eternity, where there are the penitent and the unrepentant, the damned and the saved . . . The image of a unified spirit is deeply alien to him (Bakhtin 1984, 26-27).

Like Dostoevsky, Whedon's world is not that of his characters. In creating Buffy, his goal was to create an icon of female empowerment, to change the way our culture deals with strong women. Creating a superhero was a means to that end; the self-doubt is a "Buffy Summers bonus." The theme of redemption in the Buffyverse evolved from its characters, not from any authorial intent.¹¹

The description "pluralistic" also fits the Buffyverse. There are so many worlds: suburbia, inner city, humans, higher beings, lower beings, the sinner and the righteous (frequently one and the same), penitent and unrepentant (the latter including both vampires and lawyers), and the damned and the saved. There is no moralizing here; Angel and Spike each find themselves feeling damned soon after they do any act that might contribute to saving them. Salvation comes in doses of horrifying self-revelation, as in this dialog from the end of "Damage":

Spike: Andrew double-crossed us? That's a good move. (chuckles)
Hope for the little ponce yet. Though the tingling in my forearms tells me she's too far gone to help. She's . . . one of us now. She's a monster.

Angel: She's an innocent victim.

Spike: So were we . . . once upon a time.

Angel: Once upon a time.

Many Points of View on the World

V. Lunacharsky fully defined the polyphonic novel.

[A]ll the voices playing a truly essential role . . . are actually "convictions" or "points of view on the world." Dostoevsky's novels are in fact brilliantly staged dialogs . . . [T]here was in Dostoevsky this impulse to put different vital problems up for discussion by these highly individual "voices," trembling with passion, ablaze with the fire of fanaticism—while he himself, as it

¹¹ Speaking from personal experience in writing and from talking to many other writers, great characters take on a life of their own. Once this happens, it's their story; the best thing for the writer to do is to follow them around and take notes. As Bakhtin portrays Dostoevsky, Dostoevsky's great talent as a writer was to create many great characters with wholly incompatible worldviews, to place them in an environment where their conflict is inevitable, then to maintain equal authorial distance so that he was objective towards all of them. In Bakhtin's words, "the character is a carrier of a fully valid word and not the mute, voiceless object of the author's words. The author's design for a character is a *design for discourse*. Thus the author's discourse about a character is a discourse about discourse." (Bakhtin 1984, 63) Also, "The issue here is not an absence of, but a *radical change in, the author's position* . . ." (Bakhtin 1984, 67)

were, is merely a witness to these convulsive disputes and looks on with curiosity to see how all of it will end . . . (Bakhtin 1984, 33, quoting Lunacharsky).

Spike, too, wants to see how it ends. (“Chosen”) We all want to see how it ends, and we never will. It doesn’t end; it never ends.

Lunacharsky provides a checklist for Whedon’s writing. All essential voices are “points of view on the world?” Check. Puts vital problems up for discussion by these voices? Check. Voices are trembling with passion and ablaze with the fire of fanaticism? Check. The writers are left as witness to convulsive disputes, waiting to “see how it ends?” Check, probably; in listening to the writers discussing the series, they talk about the characters as living individuals (“Season Six Overview” among many sources).

The Dialogic Hero: “I’m Cookie Dough”

[T]he hero interests Dostoevsky as a *particular point of view on the world and on oneself*, as the position enabling a person to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surrounding reality. What is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself (Bakhtin 1984, 47).

In a nutshell, this is the difference between Bakhtin and Joseph Campbell. Campbell’s focus is external; Bakhtin’s is internal. This “internal hero’s journey” is what we see in Dostoevsky and in Joss Whedon. It’s the journey we see in Buffy Summers, in Angel, in Spike, in Cordelia, in Wesley, in Faith. It’s the journey that Willow and Anya find so daunting. It’s the landscape that Xander must navigate, between the destructive legacy of his parents and the crushing knowledge that he’s the “normal one” among the Scoobies. It’s the journey that Lindsey and Gunn both refuse, a decision that brings each of them to a suburban basement where a demon known only as “the Wrath” rips their hearts out every day.

The hero as a point of view, as an opinion on the world and on himself, requires utterly special methods of discovery and artistic characterization. And this is so because what must be discovered and characterized here is not the specific existence of the hero, not his fixed image, but the *sum total of his consciousness and self-consciousness*, ultimately *the hero’s final word on himself and on his world* (Bakhtin 1984, 48).

Here, Bakhtin identifies the connection between the “psychological hero” of Dostoevsky and Whedon, and the use of polyphonic narrative as an environment in which these heroes discover and undertake their journeys. A shallow schoolgirl and the most vicious of vampires are the unlikeliest of heroes; they become heroes through their interaction with the world—in Bakhtin’s terms, a *dialog*. “*To the all-devouring consciousness of the hero the author can juxtapose only a single objective world—a world of other consciousnesses with rights equal to those of the hero*” (Bakhtin 1984, 49-50).

To the overwhelmed young Slayer, it seems as if that world of other consciousnesses has more than equal rights. The Watchers Council seeks to control the Slayer. The vampires and demons of the world want to kill her. It is her own self-awareness, and her own refusal to let the world define her, that enable her to survive and to grow. From “I’ve both been there and done that, and I’m moving on” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”) to “Make your choice. Are you ready to be strong?” (“Chosen”), life is a series of choices in which Buffy refuses to let the world choose for her.

To characterize this series of choices, we have to go back to Bakhtin again:

The author does indeed leave the final word to his hero. And precisely that final word—or, more accurately, the tendency toward it—is necessary to the author’s design. The author constructs the hero not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definitions; he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, in fact he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero’s *discourse* about himself and his world (Bakhtin 1984, 53).

The choice of the “final word” is always up to the hero:

[T]he characters no longer carry on a *literary* polemic with the finalizing secondhand definitions of man . . . but they all do furious battle with such definitions of their personality in the mouths of other people. They all acutely sense their own inner unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow, as it were, from within and to render *untrue* any externalizing and finalizing definition of them (Bakhtin 1984, 59).

Buffy is much more succinct when a detached Quentin Travers puts her through a test that nearly kills Buffy and her mother: “Bite me.” (“Helpless”) Giles also makes the transition to hero in this episode when he defies the definition of his role as Watcher, and it costs him his job. Giles has his own “furious battle with definitions in the mouths of other people”:

Quentin: Cruciamentum is not easy . . . for Slayer or Watcher. But it’s been done this way for a dozen centuries. Whenever a Slayer turns eighteen. It’s a time-honored rite of passage.
Giles: It’s an archaic exercise in cruelty. To lock her in this . . . tomb . . . weakened, defenseless. (looks at the crate behind him) And to unleash *that* on her.
 (He stares at the crate in the other room for a long moment before turning back to Quentin.)
Giles: If any one of the Council still had actual contact with a Slayer, they would see, but I’m the one in the thick of it.
Quentin: Which is why you’re not qualified to make this decision. You’re too close.
Giles: That’s not true.

Quentin: A Slayer is not just physical prowess. She must have cunning, imagination, a confidence derived from self-reliance. And believe me, once this is all over, your Buffy will be stronger for it.

Giles: Or she'll be dead for it.

By this point, Giles has decided to break the rules and end the test. Giles shows us the essence of polyphonic dialogism:

Self-consciousness as the dominant in the construction of a character's image requires the creation of an artistic atmosphere that would permit his discourse to reveal and illuminate itself. Not a single element in this atmosphere can be neutral: everything must touch the *character* to the quick, provoke him, interrogate him, even polemicize with him and taunt him; everything must be directed toward the hero himself, turned toward him, everything must make itself felt as *discourse about someone actually present*, as the word of a "second" and not of a "third" person (Bakhtin 1984, 64).

We can trace Buffy's development as a Slayer in dialogs such as this. In "Prophecy Girl," for instance, there are several. The "I quit" dialog with Giles and Angel, when Buffy finds out that a prophecy predicts her death. The "you had your whole life ahead of you" dialog with Joyce. The "What are we gonna do?" "What we have to." dialog with Willow. Through this series of dialogs, Buffy comes to terms (a little more) with her Slayer heritage, with the prophecy, and with her ability to choose and define.

In "Anne," Buffy has not only quit her role as the Slayer; she has left Sunnydale and she has abandoned her own identity. Only after a series of dialogs with Lily, Buffy decides first that she is still willing to help people, and then that she is once again willing to put herself at risk in order to help others. When we reach the point of "I'm Buffy. The Vampire Slayer. And you are?" we know that she is back, and that through her own choices, she is no longer the frightened and shattered girl we saw at the end of "Becoming."

At this point, we can see the carnivalistic aspect of the dialogic hero. For Buffy, the process of that "furious battle," the provocation, the passion, that "fire of fanaticism" results in a trip through hell. In "Becoming," it's an emotional hell. In "Anne," it's a literal hell. It's a trip that Buffy makes many times, and each time it debases her, brings her down to earth, humanizes her. When we laugh—and Whedon finds ways to make us laugh, no matter what the depth of Buffy's pain—it is that "ambivalent carnival laughter." It "burns away all that is stilted and stiff, but in no way destroys the heroic core of the image" (Bakhtin 1984, 132-133). The result is rebirth and renewal, sometimes symbolic as in "Anne," sometimes psychological as in "Normal Again," sometimes literal as in "Bargaining."

Heroes Possessed: "I'm a Champion"

Whereas Angel in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is defined by his relationship with Buffy, when he gets his own show Angel becomes obsessed with the idea of being a champion. He becomes a

classic Dostoevskian hero both because of the obsession, and also because the idea evolves dialogically throughout the series. It evolves in lock-step as Angel evolves with it. It is an infectious idea, and to the extent that each member of Angel Investigations internalizes the idea, they each undergo their own changing relationship with the idea.

Angel's journey in season two illustrates both obsession and dialogic evolution. As season one ended, a prophecy in the scroll of Aberjain predicts that Angel can become human. ("To Shanshu in L.A.") At the start of season two, Angel is keeping score, and rolling up both the body count and the mistakes. ("Judgment") He tries to save a woman from a demon, and she mocks him:

Angel: I didn't . . . I thought he was gonna hurt you!

Woman: He was my protector! (Angel tries to help her as she gets up) Stay away from me!

Angel: I'm sorry. I was sent here to . . . I'm not exactly sure, but . . .

Woman: You were sent here?

Angel: By the Powers That — It's a long story. I help people.

Woman: You're joking, right? (Walks off, holding her belly, sobbing) God, I hate this town!

Angel follows her: I'm really . . . What was he protecting you from?

Woman: Things you couldn't handle!

Angel learns that saving others won't save him through a body count. He gains a new obsession: saving one person, Darla, his sire, whom Wolfram & Hart has brought back as a human. Lorne (the Host, as he's known at this point) tries to steer Angel back on course in "Dear Boy":

Angel: So talk.

Host: So, no.

Angel: What do you mean "no." You won't tell me anything?

Host: I tell you you're headed into trouble with a capital "troub." Let her go, bro. That way lies badness.

Angel: What do you care? You got murderous demons in here. You give them free advice, but you won't help me.

Host: Hey, I set people on their paths, okay? And this is way off your path, sweetie. Go home.

It's all for naught; Angel still tries to save Darla:

Angel: You're gonna feel it, you know. What you did — that man you got killed.

Darla: Please! He was an actor.

Angel: I'm serious.

Darla: Yeah, like a heart attack (turns to look at him) and just about as much fun.

Angel: Darla, you hurt anyone else and I'll kill you.

Darla: Will you? Isn't that against your cub-scout code?

Angel: I'll make an exception.

In "The Trial," Angel fails to stop Darla's terminal illness. In "Darla" and "Reunion," Angel fails to prevent Darla from becoming a vampire again, then he fails to stop Darla and Drusilla from massacring a roomful of Wolfram & Hart lawyers. Afterwards, Angel's friends try to talk to him:

Cordy: You have to change the way you've been doing things. Don't you see where this is taking you?

Wesley: Listen to her! Right now the three of us are all that's standing between you and real darkness.

Gunn: Best believe that, man.

Angel: I do. You're all fired.

Clearly, dialogism does not always lead to refining and improving an idea. What it does do in this case is sharpen Angel's obsession. Angel has become "ablaze with the fire of fanaticism"; he has but one thought in his mind, a thought that he is trying desperately to get straight.

It is given to all of Dostoevsky's characters to "think and seek higher things"; in each of them there is a "great and unresolved thought"; all of them must, before all else, "get a thought straight." And in this resolution of a thought (an idea) lies their entire real life and their own personal unfinalizability. If one were to think away the idea in which they live, their image would be totally destroyed. In other words, the image of the hero is inseparably linked with the image of an idea and cannot be detached from it. We *see* the hero in the idea and through the idea, and we *see* the idea in him and through him. (Bakhtin 1984, 87)

Angel has that one idea; the idea and the vampire are inseparable. Angel and the idea soon undergo another change. His obsession has completed a transformation from "help the helpless" to "destroy the source of evil" as he finds a way into the Home Office of Wolfram & Hart. A dead Holland Manners accompanies him on the elevator ride to hell in "Reprise":

Angel: You're not gonna win.

Holland: Well — *no*. Of course we aren't. We have no intention of doing anything so prosaic as 'winning.'

(Holland laughs and for the first time Angel turns his head to glance in Holland's general direction.)

Angel: Then why?

Holland: Hmm? I'm sorry? Why what?

Angel: Why fight?

Holland: That's really the question you should be asking yourself, isn't it? See, for us, there is no fight. Which is why winning doesn't enter into it. We — go on — no matter what. Our firm has always been here. In one form or another. The Inquisition. The Khmer Rouge. We were there when the very first cave man

clubbed his neighbor. See, we're in the hearts and minds of every single living being. And *that*, friend, is what's making things so difficult for you. See, the world doesn't work in spite of evil, Angel. It works with us. It works because of us.

While Angel entered the elevator to the Home Office filled with the fire of conviction, he leaves the elevator with his conviction shattered. Ready to give up, he goes back to the Hyperion, where Darla is waiting to kill him. Their fight turns to sex and they sleep together, both hoping that it will cause Angel to lose his soul.¹² Instead, Angel's unfinalizable idea emerges as an epiphany: He can't save Darla, and Darla can't save him. ("Epiphany") Sleeping with Darla provided the emotional impetus for Angel's epiphany, but it was his conversation with Holland Manners that laid the intellectual framework. Both are necessary. The idea and the person possessed by the idea are inseparable.

In "Epiphany," Angel shares his insight with Kate, an ex-cop who lost her job because of her obsession with vampires. After leaving Darla, Angel saved Kate from a suicide attempt. They talk in the courtyard outside the Hyperion:

Kate: I just couldn't . . . My whole life has been about being a cop. If I'm not part of the force it's like nothing I do means anything.

Angel: It doesn't.

Kate: Doesn't what?

Angel: Mean anything. In the greater scheme or the big picture, nothing we do matters. There's no grand plan, no big win.

Kate: You seem kind of chipper about that.

Angel: Well, I guess I kinda — worked it out. If there is no great glorious end to all this, if — nothing we do matters, — then all that matters is what we do. 'Cause that's all there is. What we do, now, today. I fought for so long. For redemption, for a reward — finally just to beat the other guy, but . . . I never got it.

Kate: And now you do?

Angel: Not all of it. All I wanna do is help. I wanna help because — I don't think people should suffer, as they do. Because, if there is no bigger meaning, then the smallest act of kindness — is the greatest thing in the world.

Kate: Yikes. It sounds like you had an epiphany.

Angel: I keep saying that. But nobody's listening.

Spike is also a character who can be defined by a single thought that he has to get straight. He is indeed "love's bitch" ("Lovers Walk") and it is love that defines him. Prior to season four, it's his love for Drusilla. His loss of Drusilla is compounded in "The Initiative" when he gets his chip; he no longer has his "badness," and holding on to that illusion becomes his only link to his

¹² Angel's widely-misunderstood curse, that if he gets groiny, the world as we know it will fall apart. (Cordelia, in "I Will Remember You") As it turns out, sex does not equal perfect happiness.

years with Drusilla. Then he realizes that he's in love with Buffy and thus begins his slow, tortured evolution toward becoming a Champion, all for the love of a Slayer.

Dialog That Provokes Change: "You Think We're Dancing?"

"Fool For Love" is a major turning point for Spike, as it is for Buffy and for Joyce. Joyce's narrative is the least dialogic, at least in terms of her own role; the dialogs about sickness and death don't really start until the next episode.

Buffy has returned to her roots by asking Giles to be her Watcher again, but her dialog with Spike brings her even closer to her own obsession, her unwillingness to be the Slayer. "Fool For Love" begins and ends with Buffy facing death at the hands of a vampire. In the opening, an ordinary vampire stakes her with her own stake on a routine patrol. The wound is serious, but Buffy's self-confidence is more shaken by the fact that it happened at all. At the end of the episode, Spike threatens her with a shotgun, and she gives him only a glance of fatalistic indifference.

In between is a dialog between Spike and Buffy that could be subtitled "Dances With Slayers." After researching the deaths of past Slayers with Giles, to learn how and why they died, Buffy turns to Spike for answers, knowing that Spike has killed two Slayers. What she learns from Spike is perhaps more than she wants to know.

The sequence in which Spike simultaneously kills a Slayer in New York City in 1977¹³ and teaches Buffy about the killing of Slayers, is beautifully done. 1977's Spike talks directly to present-day Buffy; Spike's 1977 killing flows perfectly with his present-day demonstration-fight with Buffy.

Such a *pairing* of scenes (and individual images) that reflect one another or shine through one another—one given in the comic plane and the other in the tragic . . . or one on a lofty and the other on a low plane, or one affirming, the other repudiating, and so forth . . . taken together, these paired scenes create an ambivalent whole. It is evidence of an even deeper influence of the carnival sense of the world (Bakhtin 1984, 162).

The focus of the dialog, however, is all in the present day:

Spike: She was cunning, resourceful . . . oh, did I mention? Hot. I could have danced all night with that one.

Buffy: You think we're dancing?

Spike: That's all we've ever done.

(Spike breaks one of the subway car's hand rails and wields it as a weapon.)

¹³ We later find out that she was Nikki Wood, that she left a son behind, and that the son returns to take vengeance on Spike. ("First Date" and "Lies My Parents Told Me")

Spike: And the thing about the dance is, you never get to stop.
(Spike flips the pool cue up and spins it like the hand rail.)

Spike: Every day you wake up, it's the same bloody question that haunts you: is today the day I die?

To Spike, it's a dance; it's never been anything more than a dance. When the dance is over, Spike walks away, but his victim doesn't. Spike neither knows nor cares; he's looking for his next dance.

The dialog's effect on Buffy runs deep. Besides her revulsion at Spike's attitude, the lessons Spike teaches reinforce her own sense of mortality awakened by her staking the night before. All that any vampire needs or wants is "one good day." On going home, Buffy gets a third dose of mortality when Joyce tells her that she's going in for a CAT scan the next day. It's more than Buffy can bear, and she retreats to the back porch to sit and cry quietly in shock. Perhaps the idea of having a death wish, as Spike told her, is more than she can deal with at this point, but by the end of the season, both Buffy and Joyce will be dead. "Fool For Love" marks the beginning of that downward spiral for both of them.

Back to the dance.

Spike: Sooner or later, you're gonna want it. And the second — the second — that happens . . .

(Spike claps his hands together inches from Buffy's face.)

Spike: You know I'll be there. I'll slip in . . . have myself a real good day.

(He stares intently into Buffy's eyes, then steps back.)

Spike: Here endeth the lesson. I just wonder if you'll like it as much as she did.

Buffy: (cold) Get out of my sight. Now.

Spike: Oh . . . did I scare ya? You're the Slayer. Do something about it. Hit me. Come on. One good swing. You know you want to.

Buffy: I mean it.

Spike: So do I. Give it me good, Buffy. Do it!

(The tension is rising between them.)

Buffy: Spike . . .

(His passion aroused, Spike leans in to kiss her. She backs away in horror.)

Buffy: What the hell are you doing?

(He grabs Buffy by the arms, his words coming in a breathless pant.)

Spike: Come on. I can feel it, Slayer. You know you want to dance.

Buffy: Say it's true. Say I do want to.

(She shoves him to the ground and looks down at him with disgust.)

Buffy: It wouldn't be you, Spike. It would never be you.

(She tosses the wad of cash at him contemptuously.)

Buffy: You're beneath me.

That one line, "You're beneath me," echoes through Spike's memories back to the night he was made as a vampire. It all started (also shown in "Fool For Love") when Spike—then a witless fop named William—pledged his love to Cecily. She rejected him by saying, "You're beneath me."

It was a crushing blow for William; he fled out into the night, encountered Drusilla, and was killed. One hundred twenty years later, he loves a Slayer, and she also rejects him. Deeply hurt and enraged, he storms back to his crypt to get a shotgun, then goes back out into the night to find Buffy and kill her.

Spike finds Buffy on the back porch of her house, in tears, and the dialog comes to its very unexpected end:

Buffy: What do you want now?

(Spike is about to pull the trigger when he sees her tears and through them, her pain. His rage vanishes in an instant.)

Spike: What's wrong?

Buffy: I don't want to talk about it.

(Spike lowers the gun.)

Spike: Is there something I can do?

(Buffy says nothing, the reality of her mother's situation hitting her like a steel weight, overcoming her. Spike sits down next to her and tentatively pats her back, trying to comfort her. She lets him.)

In this moment, Spike experiences empathy for possibly the first time in his life. This is his tentative first step toward redemption and becoming a Champion.

Essentiality of Dialog: "You killed people. You can't see her."

While we've given a lot of focus to the effects of dialogism on characters and ideas, we haven't looked at the flip side, which is that isolation stifles the development of ideas.

The second condition for creating an image of the idea in Dostoevsky is his profound understanding of the dialogic nature of human thought, the dialogic nature of the idea. Dostoevsky knew how to reveal, to see, to show the true realm of the life of an idea. The idea *lives* not in one person's *isolated* individual consciousness—if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies. The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of *others* (Bakhtin 1984, 87-88).

The episode "Conversations With Dead People" is a masterpiece of dialogic isolation. Buffy feels cut off from her friends, and on a routine patrol in the cemetery she meets a vampire who in

life was someone she knew. She opens up, talks to him, then slays him. Willow, alone in the library, talks to a ghost. Dawn, alone at home, also talks to a ghost. Andrew and Jonathan return to Sunnydale, where Andrew kills Jonathan, making Andrew the last living member of the Nerd Trio. Spike, on a solitary roam through Sunnydale, picks up a woman in a bar, walks her home, and kills her.

Everyone talks, but only to the dead or dying. Within the context of the episode, all ideas die, too, although in the following episode, "Sleeper," the survivors begin to talk to each other, and ideas begin to thrive again.

Grossman's observations on the musical nature of Dostoevsky's compositions are very true and subtle. Transposing Glinka's statement that "everything in life is counterpoint" from the language of music theory to the language of poetics, one could say that for Dostoevsky *everything in life was dialog, that is, dialogic opposition* (Bakhtin 1984, 42).

This idea of counterpoint suggests an alternative structure for "Conversations With Dead People," recognizing that in all the dialogs except Buffy's conversation with a vampire, one of the individuals is a manifestation of the First, who can only manifest as a person who has died. Dead Cassie tells Willow that Tara isn't allowed to talk to her. Dead Warren urges Andrew to kill Jonathan. Dead Joyce tells Dawn that when it's bad, Buffy won't choose her. Dead Spike has implanted a trigger in vampire Spike that sets Spike on a killing spree. The trigger is a song that Spike's mother used to sing. Perhaps not by chance, the vampire talking to Buffy was killed by Spike.

With this realignment, we're down to a non-dialog between Buffy and the First. The First's dialogs with Willow and Dawn are attempts to peel away Buffy's support system. With Jonathan dying on the seal over the Hellmouth, and Spike set in motion as a killer, the First is gathering its weapons. Buffy's dialog goes nowhere; she knows she's talking to a dead acquaintance who won't survive the night.

The episode becomes simply a counterpoint between two voices, one not yet ready to confront the other, and the other not yet aware that the First has returned. In a loose sense, it is in the form of a passacaglia, a slow and stately dance piece with two voices that never interact, one that repeats over and over while the other speaks in isolation.¹⁴ Without a "genuine dialogic relationship with others," the isolated voices fade into the silence as the singer in the Bronze closes: "Can I make it right? Can I spend the night? Alone."

Parodic Doubles and Insect Reflections

We discussed the structural perspective on parody earlier in relation to carnival. "To the pure genres (epic, tragedy) parody is organically alien; to the carnivalized genres it is, on the contrary,

¹⁴ Shostakovich used the form of the passacaglia to evoke formal mourning and grief. Examples include the Prelude No. 12 in G# Minor from 24 Preludes & Fugues, op. 87, and the third movement of Piano Trio No. 2, op. 67.

organically inherent.” (Bakhtin 1984, 127) However, it also plays a crucial structural role in Dostoevsky’s dialogic relationships between characters:

This stubborn urge to see everything as coexisting, to perceive and show all things side by side and simultaneous, as if they existed in space and not in time, leads Dostoevsky to dramatize, in space, even internal contradictions and internal stages in the development of a single person—forcing a character to converse with his own double, with the devil, with his alter ego, with his own caricature . . . (Bakhtin 1984, 28).

Once you start looking for parodic doubles in the Buffyverse, they’re everywhere, and at some point virtually every major character either has a double, or performs the role of a double. The most obvious instances are pure character doubles, such as Willow and Vampire Willow in “Doppelgängerland,” and competent Xander with incompetent Xander in “The Replacement.” “Life of the Party” is a Halloween parody, but it also features Lorne’s sleep, which begins as an exact double but transforms into a murderous grotesque as the carnival progresses. In “A Hole in the World,” the Conduit meets Gunn as Gunn himself:

Conduit as Gunn: You don’t want to be here.
Gunn: I never want to be here. What happened to the cat?
Conduit as Gunn: The physical form of the conduit is determined by the viewer.
Gunn: So, I’m looking at me because, what? We gonna play a mirror game? Get our mime on?
Conduit as Gunn: You are failing.
Gunn: I’m not the issue here.
Conduit as Gunn: I believe that you think that.
Gunn: You can’t let this happen to Fred.
Conduit as Gunn: This is the part where I need to be clear. I am not your friend. I am not your flunky. I am your conduit to the senior partners, and they are tired of your insolence. Oh, yeah. They are not here for your convenience.
Gunn: I didn’t come for a favor. We can make a deal.
Conduit as Gunn: Deals are for the devil.
Gunn: You want someone else—a life for hers—you’ll get it. You can have mine.
Conduit as Gunn: I already do.

Buffy gets several doubles through the series. There’s the Buffybot, who caricatures the first-season shallow Buffy to emphasize the darkness that has taken over the real Buffy by late in season five. In “The Weight of the World,” when Willow goes inside Buffy’s mind to break her out of her catatonia, she finds three Buffy doubles: an adult who explains that death is her gift, another adult who tells Willow when and how she killed Dawn, and a child Buffy waiting to greet baby Dawn coming home from the hospital, an event that Buffy knows never happened. In season seven, the First plays a Buffy that is by turns defeatist, taunting, and nihilistic, to wear down first Spike and then Buffy herself.

Buffy also has alter egos to contend with. The first is Kendra, the disciplined, studious, unimaginative Slayer, the she-Giles. Then there is Faith, the dark Slayer, whom Buffy recognizes as the Slayer she could have become (and not too different from Wishverse Buffy in “The Wish”). The Buffy/Faith doubling becomes ever more complex, as Buffy tries to kill Faith in “Graduation Day,” then Faith returns in “This Year’s Girl” to take Buffy’s life and family. In “Sanctuary” Buffy is ready to kill Faith again, but instead must save her from the Watchers Council. Finally, Faith returns to Sunnydale as an escaped convict and reformed murderer (death and rebirth), ready to play her role as Slayer again. In “Faith, Hope, and Trick,” Buffy worried about getting “single-white-female,” but in “Empty Places,” that is exactly what happens when Faith replaces Buffy as leader of the Potentials. Buffy’s third alter ego is Dawn, the normal teenager that Buffy never got to be. “Parodying is the creation of a *decrowning double*; it is that same ‘world turned inside out’” (Bakhtin 1984, 127).

Angel gets his share of doubles and alter egos. The most spectacular would be the dream-trip that Angelus shares with Faith, as they watch Angel’s journey through history and America culminating in the fight between Angel and Angelus. Then there is the Groosalug, hero, champion, and rival for Cordelia, whom Cordelia dresses in Angel’s clothes after giving him an Angel haircut.

In a sense, Holland Manners is another of Angel’s alter egos. They both run organizations that are deeply involved in the fight between good and evil. Holland knows exactly how to manipulate Angel. Also, his vision of Wolfram & Hart is flexible enough to adapt to putting Angel in charge of their Los Angeles branch, leaving Wolfram & Hart still be able to carry out its mission. It is Holland’s vision that Angel fights all through season five. The dialog between Angel and Holland doesn’t stop when Angel walks away from that elevator ride; it just moves inside Angel’s head—which is not such a good place for it, because there is no internal connection, no connection between consciousnesses (Bakhtin 1984, 69).

Angel’s most persistent alter ego, though, is Spike: family, enemy, rival, soulmate in a black leather duster. Whether it’s Spike’s ghost roaming the halls of Wolfram & Hart like Hamlet’s ghost, or Angel and Spike hanging side by side in chains waiting for the Immortal, Angel can’t get away from him. They test each other, rebuke each other, and share insights over the life of the souled undead.

Spike has his parodic doubles, too; the First assumes his form to taunt him and control him. He never loses the shadow of William the Bloody Awful Poet.

Other alter egos abound, always bedeviling their counterparts. Willow and Anya are rivals with strong connections to Xander, and they are both socially inept. Another of Willow’s mirrors is Amy, the other high school witch who could never compete with Willow and never stopped resenting her. Willow’s other mirror is Warren Mears, who got over his head in technology just as Willow did in magic. Willow’s guilt over killing Warren nearly overcomes her in “The Killer in Me.”

The Pylea arc in *Angel* is one continuous carnival, with its parodic inversion of human and demon roles and its caricatures of human ritual and custom. Lorne finds his doubles in both Landok the brave and courageous warrior, and in Numfar the dancer. Lorne is also dismembered

and reborn. Cordelia, who has often and deliberately played the role of fool¹⁵ throughout the series, is crowned as princess, with a ritual decrowning narrowly averted. Angel meets his alter ego in the Groosalug. Fred is reborn from her cave. After Pylea, Cordelia comes to terms a little more with understanding which people and goals are important in her life.

Carnivalistic laughter likewise is directed toward something higher—toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders. Laughter embraces both poles of change, it deals with the very process of change, with *crisis* itself. Combined in the act of carnival laughter are death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter). This is a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world. Such is the specificity of ambivalent carnival laughter (Bakhtin 1984, 127).

This is not even a complete catalog of all the parodic doubles; the point is to become aware that they are everywhere in the Buffyverse, and that they are a crucial aspect of the Buffyverse. All characters must interact in some way with their doubles, and the dialogs are ongoing. Xander looks at Riley, and sees the soldier that Xander can only pretend to be. Angel plays squash with the devil. Cordelia listens to Fred and marvels, “You know, next to you, I am downright linear.” (“That Vision Thing”) Ben is Glory; Wesley is Giles. Angel and Spike cannot escape each other; yet after more than a century they argue about astronauts and cavemen. (“A Hole in the World”) As Bakhtin notes, “. . . there are also no separate thoughts or positions. They never argue over *separate points*, but always over *whole points of view*, inserting themselves and their entire idea into even the briefest exchange” (Bakhtin 1984, 98).

Dialog and laughter; laughter and dialog. Each is a way of shaping and reforming ideas through interaction with others. As Bakhtin notes about *Crime and Punishment*:

[H]ere, in the voice of Svidrigailov, who is one of Raskolnikov’s parodic doubles, the idea has a completely different sound and turns toward us another of its sides . . . Raskolnikov’s idea comes into contact with various manifestations of life throughout the entire novel; it is tested, verified, confirmed or repudiated by them (Bakhtin 1984, 89).

Closing Thoughts: Changing Popular Culture

Joss Whedon did not create *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* solely for our entertainment:

¹⁵ The role of fool is not unique to Cordelia. Xander, Anya, Spike, Lorne, Andrew, and Harmony all take their turns. The fool is an honored role in both carnival and Russian literature; the fool is the outsider who can say the things that no one else can say, and get away with it. In carnival, it is often the fool who is crowned and decrowned. In Russian history, the *yurodivy* (“holy fool”) was venerated by the Russian Orthodox Church. Artists such as Modest Mussorgsky, Mikhail Zoshchenko, and Dmitri Shostakovich deliberately played the *yurodivy* as part of their public personas. (Volkov xxv-xxvii)

If I made “Buffy the Lesbian Separatist” a series of lectures on PBS on why there should be feminism, no one would be coming to the party, and it would be boring. The idea of changing culture is important to me, and it can only be done in a popular medium (Joss Whedon, in Nussbaum).

Usually the focus of this quote is Whedon’s joke about lectures on PBS. In the context of carnival and dialogism, though, the second sentence is far more interesting. How is it possible to change culture?

Dialogism is part of the answer. Every conversation includes the possibility of change. Whether that change actually happens is a separate question; for Dostoevsky, for Bakhtin, and for Whedon, it is the *potential* for change in a person that provides the potential for change within the culture, one person at a time.

If dialogs can change only one or two persons at a time, then there have to be a lot of dialogs to change an entire culture. To that end, Whedon has constructed the Buffyverse as an elaborate and engaging universe, based on folk stories (the vampire legends), medieval folk culture (carnival), and our modern popular (folk) culture. Its morals are not as straightforward as those of Aesop’s fables, though. Consider this perspective on the relationship between carnival and meaning:

Carnivalization is not an external and immobile schema which is imposed upon ready-made content; it is, rather, an extraordinarily flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things. By *relativizing* all that was externally stable, set and ready-made, carnivalization with its pathos of change and renewal permitted Dostoevsky to penetrate into the deepest layers of man and human relationships (Bakhtin 1984, 166).

Given the complex ambiguities Whedon creates through his metaphors, his parodies, and the complex moral issues that his characters struggle with, what we are left with is this “pathos of change and renewal,” and a collection of stories that “penetrate into the deepest layers of man and human relationships.”

Whatever the change that Whedon wants to see in our culture, he has not given us any simple answers. He trusts us to think and to feel, to engage in a dialog of ideas, and to respond accordingly. The change in culture is ultimately what *we* want it to be.

If it were as simple as a fable, Giles could explain it to us, as he did in “Restless”:

Olivia: Does she always want to train this badly?

Giles: Well, it appears she’s never heard the fable about patience. (Buffy pulls them through crowds of people. Carnival booths, colorful lights.)

Olivia: Which one is that?

Giles: The, the one about the fox, and the, uh, less patient fox.

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