

**The Buffered Slayer:  
A Search for Meaning in a Secular Age**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in English

By  
Kari Willinger  
1 May 2018

Liberty University  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Master of Arts in English

Student Name: Kari Willinger

---

Dr. Marybeth Baggett, Thesis Chair

Date

---

Dr. Stephen Bell, First Reader

Date

---

Mr. Alexander Grant, Second Reader

Date

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my very deep appreciation to:

Dr. Baggett, for the encouragement to think outside of the box and patience through the many drafts and revisions;

Dr. Bell and Mr. Grant, for providing insightful feedback and direction;

My family for prayer and embracing my crazy;

My roommates for the endless hours of *Buffy* marathons;

My friends for the continued love and emotional and moral support.

You have all challenged and encouraged me through the process of writing this thesis, and I am incredibly grateful to each and every one of you.

**Table of Contents**

**Introduction**.....5

**Chapter One - The Stakes of Morality: Buffy as Moral Authority** .....15

**Chapter Two - Losing Faith: The Buffered Self as Fragmented Identity**.....29

**Chapter Three - The Soulful Undead: Spike’s Dissatisfied Fulfillment** .....42

**Chapter Four - Which Will: A Longing for Enchantment**.....56

**Conclusion**.....71

**Works Cited**.....77

## Introduction

*“I knew that everyone I cared about was all right. I knew it. Time ... didn’t mean anything... nothing had form ... but I was still me, you know? And I was warm ... and I was loved ... and I was finished. Complete. I don’t understand theology or dimensions, or ... any of it, really ... but I think I was in heaven”*

- Buffy (“Afterlife”).

Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, claims that over time, modernity has given way to a new secular age, and with this new era comes cultural shifts in our perception of ourselves and the world. James K. A. Smith offers a primer for Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, and in it, he provides a summation of Taylor’s argument: “our age is haunted. On the one hand, we live under a brass heaven, ensconced in immanence. We live in the twilight of both gods and idols. But their ghosts have refused to depart, and every once in a while we might be surprised to find ourselves tempted by belief, by intimations of transcendence” (3-4). Taylor’s argument revolves around the cultural shift from an enchanted world to a disenchanted world, which has given rise to exclusive humanism. Given Taylor’s notion of a world haunted by transcendence, we can notice this haunting throughout aspects of modernity, especially in literature and entertainment where we can see authors and creators deal with issues of identity and morality from a purely modern perspective. Specifically, Taylor’s concepts connect with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* because the characters in *Buffy* align with Taylor’s understanding of our age’s exclusive humanism, which affects each character uniquely. The buffered self can lead to exclusive humanism, does not follow a universal standard of morality, creates quasi-significance and meaning, and is haunted by the transcendence that it rejects. Each character emphasizes one of these aspects of the

buffered self, and through the different characters, we can see and understand the effects the buffered self have on identity and moral understanding.

Since the show's premiere in 1997, there has been a great deal of scholarship addressing ideas in the program especially regarding the characters' identities and moral questions raised by their behavior, but usually, these aspects of the characters are mutually exclusive, or they are analyzed through an exclusively humanistic perspective. Gregory Stevenson, author of *Televised Morality: The Case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, provides an in-depth analysis of morality and identity in terms of *Buffy* and its characters; however, Stevenson's analysis does not acknowledge that the perception of identity has changed in modernity, which affects how we perceive moral culpability and responsibility. Stevenson connects morality and identity, but his sense of moral understanding comes from an exclusively humanist perspective: "Morality is less about *what* one does than about *who* one is, for an individual's moral choices are motivated by how they see themselves in relation to the world around them. Identity and morality coexist in a symbiotic relationship" (92). Stevenson relates the moral choices the characters make with the moral understanding evident within the show and within the universe constructed in the show, but if "the world around" the characters is a disenchanted world without transcendence, the basis for moral understanding comes from the individual characters instead of a universal moral agent.

Stevenson focuses on the individual characters and how each character's moral understanding is a piece of his or her identity, but Stevenson's focus does not include the issue of modernity that Taylor focuses on in *A Secular Age*: "Our self-identity affects how we conceptualize right and wrong and why we make certain moral choices. On the other hand, the moral choices we make can also shape our identity either by affirming or calling into question our conception of self. In other words, we make moral choices based both on who we are and on

who we wish to become” (92). Stevenson’s argument provides useful information regarding characters and the morality inherent within the show, but this thesis will take that one step farther and discuss how modernity has shifted understandings of identity and morality within a secular age.

While Stevenson offers connections between morality and identity, most articles and books about *Buffy* focus on one or the other. Rhonda Wilcox, a well-known author of works relating to *Buffy*, wrote *Why Buffy Matters?: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which explores symbolism, imagery, and offers in-depth analysis of certain episodes. Each chapter focuses on one theme, but no chapter focuses on identity, morality, and modernity. Other articles by Rhonda Wilcox and other authors have been published on *Slayage*, a journal dedicated to *Buffy* studies, but these articles typically run too short to be able to provide an insightful analysis on specific characters’ identities, moral standards, and their relation to modernity. However, Gregory Erickson provides the rare informative study on *Buffy*’s understanding of morality. According to Erickson, “[b]ehind the witty dialogue and the engaging characters, behind the metaphors of monsters and demons, the show occupies a space between belief and disbelief, between an absolute morality and nihilism” (110). While there are many articles and books dedicated to *Buffy*, no work captures a full account of the intersection of morality and identity within *Buffy* because without addressing the cultural shift that Taylor describes, any account is incomplete.

Smith’s summation of Taylor’s philosophy provides a unique insight into modernity and its effects on people in the secular age, which will prove useful in my analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Taylor first diagnoses the shift between an enchanted world and a disenchanted world, and with Smith explaining that an enchanted world is a world that is open to outside

forces. It is enchanted with not only the divine, but also with dark forces, and significance and meaning is inherent in the world (27, 29-30). In this enchanted world, people have porous selves, which are open to these outside forces because, in this world, it is practically impossible to not believe in God; otherwise, the self would be open to the dark forces instead of the divine (30). However, when the culture shifts from the premodern to modern, the world loses its enchantment. Smith explains “that modernity ‘disenchants’ the world — evacuates it of spirits and various ghosts in the machine. Diseases are not demonic, mental illness is no longer possession, the body is no longer ensouled” (28). Once the world is disenchanted, the porous self can no longer exist, so the porous self shifts into the buffered self.

While the porous self is open to the divine and to dark forces, the buffered self is closed off from outside forces and focuses exclusively on self-development and the immanent world. Smith describes how the buffered self isolates itself, in a way, as to keep the focus on the individual instead of the collective: “The buffering of the self from alien forces also carves out a space for a nascent privacy, and such privacy provides both protection and permission to disbelieve. Once individuals become the locus of meaning, the social atomism that results means that disbelief no longer has social consequences” (31). By protecting itself from outside forces, the buffered self begins to focus on the immanent world, which leads to what Taylor calls exclusive humanism. Through exclusive humanism, the buffered self believes it can create or find significance and meaning through its own means (140). When the world was enchanted, the self could rely on a universal standard for moral understanding and could rely on the inherent meaning found in objects and places, now, however, the buffered self creates false significance and meaning.

Exclusive humanism creates a problem in Taylor's diagnosis of the secular age because without the help of the divine and universal moral standards, the buffered self is left to create moral codes based on internal, subjective standards. Taylor, in Smith's reading of *A Secular Age*, explains the problem with dependence on moral codes unfounded in transcendence: "a great deal of effort in modern liberal society is invested in defining and applying codes of conduct" (p. 704). Policy is driven by a kind of 'code fixation': we don't know how to *make* people moral, but we do know how to specify rules, articulate expectation, lay down the law" (Smith 128)

Without a higher authority on morality, people do not have a strong foundation to stand in reference to their moral choices. Because the buffered self creates its own moral standards, moral understanding loses its transcendent, universal reference point. In *Buffy*, without a universal moral standard, the characters base their moral understanding and culpability on codes that are created from subjective standards that are not true standards at all.

Taylor frequently delineates the difference between transcendence and immanence in regards to the buffered self as the buffered self attempts to achieve fullness in immanence, even though the pursuit of immanence blocks the buffered self from achieving true fullness in transcendence. Transcendence consists of outside forces like the divine or dark forces, and immanence derives from what Smith calls "a self-sufficient, naturalistic universe" (141). Taylor also calls this the immanent frame, which is "a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence" (141). However, by precluding transcendence, the buffered self also denies itself from true fullness.

Within the immanent frame, people are still haunted by transcendence, and Taylor defines the human drive for transcendence as a "fullness." According to Smith's definition,

fullness is “a term meant to capture the human impulsion to find significance, meaning, value — even if entirely within the immanent frame” (141). Even though the self has moved from porous to buffered, from open to closed off from outside forces, the self still feels a pull to understand life and meaning and significance; however, the buffered self, instead of reaching out towards transcendence and fullness, tries to create significance for itself. Yet, Smith explains the consequences of the buffered self trying to find or create such meaning: “[s]ignificance no longer inheres in things; rather, meaning and significance are a property of minds who perceive meaning internally. The external world might be a catalyst for perceiving meaning, but the meanings are generated within the mind – or, in stronger versions...meanings are imposed upon things by minds” (Smith 29). Secularization began when “significance” moved from an objective, external truth to a mere construct of the human mind.

The buffered self is so individualized that through the mind, it attempts to create significance; however, when the buffered self senses transcendence while being pulled at the same time towards immanence, the buffered self experiences cross-pressure (Smith 140). This cross pressure can cause “fugitive expressions of doubt and longing, faith and questioning” (Smith 14), and can cause the buffered self to look for new ways to reach significance or fullness, which he labels the nova effect (Smith 62). The buffered self strives to find fullness in life, but without transcendence, it will continue to fruitlessly search for meaning.

While Taylor provides the critical framework for this thesis and offers many terms and categories by which to analyze *Buffy*, Alasdair MacIntyre also provides necessary insights for an in-depth analysis of *Buffy*. Taylor discusses the shift from premodern to modern and describes the resultant changes to identity and morality, but MacIntyre offers a deeper understanding of morals and ethics. In this secular age, morality and moral codes exist, but “[i]n a world of secular

rationality religion could no longer provide such a shared background and foundation for moral discourse and action” (MacIntyre 50). If religion, or a divine figure, is no longer considered the authority over morality, then the foundation for moral decisions is unstable. MacIntyre relates this unstable foundation to the fact that people now believe in certain truths but have no shared basis for understanding (65). Here, MacIntyre highlights Taylor’s concept of exclusive humanism by detailing the problems that exclusive humanism can cause in regards to an individual’s moral understanding and culpability. He also provides key elements for understanding just how morality has changed under modernity by describing how a character might create new moral codes and standards for him or herself.

While connecting Taylor’s concepts to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* might seem strange, it is important to recognize that *Buffy* is emblematic of the cultural milieu Taylor suggests in his discussion of immanence and the buffered self. The characters in *Buffy* rely on immanence. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is about a mystical lineage that consists of women who have the power to protect the world from mythical beings.<sup>1</sup> Though the show portrays mythical beings, it is situated within immanence; each character, good or evil, is highly individualized with no connection to a higher power. A voice-over during the title sequence included in most episodes says, “In every generation, there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer” (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). The premise of the show is that one girl is the protector of the world, but this premise shifts after Season One. In the Season One finale, Buffy dies. Xander resuscitates her, but Buffy’s death causes the Slayer line to change forever. After this Season, two Slayers exist at the same time. Other than the Vampire Slayer, and eventual Slayers, the show also focuses on Buffy’s close group of friends, which includes

---

<sup>1</sup> The show includes a wide range of mystical and mythical beings such as vampires, witches, werewolves, demons, fairytale monsters (“Hush”), Gods (Season 5), hellhounds (“Prom”), etc.

Xander, an ordinary human; Willow, a powerful witch; and Giles, Buffy's Watcher and mentor. This group also includes Faith, one of the new Vampire Slayers, off and on throughout the seasons.

*Buffy* deals with issues of morality throughout all seven Seasons, though the show's moral understanding changes over time, and each character reacts and interacts with morality differently. This group of characters each experience life differently, and they each connect to Taylor's understanding of the buffered self, its construction of individual morality, and modernity's role in creating such conditions. Stevenson elaborates on the role good and evil take within the show: "*Buffy's* perspective on good and evil is not a relativistic one in which the categories of good and evil are constantly redefined based on current circumstances, but neither is it an absolute one in which good and evil are always clearly defined. *Buffy* mocks the idea of an absolute moral structure when it is used as a club to manipulate the behavior of others" (73). Moral standards are seen in the show's association of what is good and what is evil, but much like Stevenson says, no absolute moral structure exists, possibly because no absolute moral figure exists. While *Buffy* challenges the stereotypes of good and evil, which conveys a sense of transcendent moral purpose because the show is haunted by transcendence, religion and God are excluded from most aspects of the show.

Not only do the characters seem to fall under Taylor's definition of the buffered self, but the show is also reminiscent of Taylor's description of the disenchanting world. Though the world is shrouded in the mystical, it rejects transcendence, much like Taylor describes regarding the secular age in which we now live. Erickson claims, "we see no heaven, no God, no Christ. There are no functioning churches, and there is no serious prayer . . . There are occasional references to the sacred/pagan nature of humans versus demons and vampires, but the creatures of the night

are usually the only ones who get to quote the Bible” (114). In one of the first episodes, Giles retells the creation story, but God is absent from the narrative because the biblical narrative is not referenced (“The Harvest”). Even though *Buffy* exists within a world full of demons and Vampire Slayers, the show and its characters reject the possibility of transcendence and the divine.

However, the show does include religious symbols such as the cross, resurrection, sacrifice, holy water, and holy ground. Stevenson furthers Erickson’s claim: “Buffy’s cosmology and spiritual perspective is also problematic. Buffy’s world is polytheistic, populated by a smorgasbord of demons, demigods, and spirits. Curiously, despite this polytheistic cosmology, God is largely absent. It is not that God is rejected or his existence is overtly denied; he is simply not mentioned in any way that implies an active role” (13). The show also includes heaven and hell dimensions, yet while a hell god is characterized, a god from a heavenly dimension is never mentioned or portrayed. Reiss, commenting on *Buffy*’s lack of a higher power, discusses the unbalanced portrayal of dark versus light: “one might expect that *Buffy*’s fairly dualistic universe, which takes for granted the existence of a First Evil, the primordial force that engenders all evil creatures, would also assume the existence of a corresponding First Good” (Reiss xiii). At first glance, *Buffy* might seem like a show suffused with transcendence, but upon a closer look, one can see that transcendence is absent from the show. However, while the show exists within a pure experience of immanence, it continues to be haunted by transcendence.

Because the show rejects true transcendence, the character’s selves have become buffered or internalized; however, the show is shrouded or haunted by transcendence that the characters each connect with differently. Instead of finding meaning in a greater power or in an enchanted world, the buffered self believes it can find meaning without recourse to the divine. In the pre-

modern world, morality founded in transcendence informed identity, which in turn created the porous self, while in a secular age that has become disenchanted, one's autonomous identity informs morality. In *Buffy*, I argue that the characters each possess a "buffered" self, and since they attempt to find meaning within themselves, their morality is contingent upon their own freely chosen identities, and through each character's moral understanding, an aspect of the buffered self is emphasized in the show, which displays the effects of the buffered self in modernity. Taylor's notion of selfhood is essential because the characters in *Buffy* almost unconsciously practice the modern ritual of the buffered self, and this attempt to find fullness suffers without aid from transcendence. The characters of *Buffy* highlight the buffered self and the effects that immanentization have on modernity, especially in regards to the characters that operate within a buffered self but are haunted by transcendence. Each character portrays an aspect of the buffered self the effects that this aspect can cause in our secular age.

## Chapter One - The Stakes of Morality: Buffy as Moral Authority

*“In every generation there is a Chosen One. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer”*

(“Welcome to the Hellmouth”).

In the world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, supernatural realms, gods, demons, and other mystical forces exist. However, while supernatural forces have invaded this world, God is consistently absent from the narrative because the show does not draw on the biblical narrative or myth. In Season One, Giles says, “Contrary to popular mythology, [the world] did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons, demons walked the earth. They made it their home, their hell. But in time, they lost their purchase on this reality. The way was made for mortal animals, for, for man. All that remains of the old ones are vestiges, certain magics, certain creatures” (“Harvest”). While Giles mentions Hell, demons, and even references the Garden of Eden, he never explains how the world came into existence or who created it.

Despite the inclusion of the mystical, the show’s lack of recognition for the existence of God places it in Taylor’s Secular Age. Smith explains that, according to Taylor, “our age is haunted. On the one hand, we live under a brass heaven, ensconced in immanence. We live in the twilight of both gods and idols. But their ghosts have refused to depart, and every once in a while we might be surprised to find ourselves tempted by belief, by intimations of transcendence” (3-4). Buffy’s world is shrouded in the ghosts and silhouette of God and transcendence, and Buffy herself is haunted in the show. Buffy operates within a buffered self, and because of this, she is blocked from ever attaining transcendence, but without transcendence, Buffy must become the moral authority in the show in order to create the moral standards that she must operate in as the Slayer.

As the Slayer, Buffy is meant to bring balance to the fight between good and evil; her calling as a Slayer seems to require a level of transcendence since she is meant to be a force of good, which conveys this haunting pressure over Buffy's role in the world. Because vampires and demons exist, the Slayer also exists to reduce the supernatural beings' numbers. In Season Seven, when the First Evil decides to disrupt the balance between good and evil, it attempts to kill all potential Slayers because the Slayer, and thus the Slayer line, keeps either side, good or evil, from winning. Buffy's power as the Slayer is enough to save the world from multiple apocalypses; she, along with her friends, attempt to prove that they do not need divine aid to face evil and save others, which places them within buffered selves. Taylor explains that "[f]or the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing" (qtd. in Smith 23). The balance between good and evil must always exist, and Buffy and her friends continue to fight against evil in order to protect humanity. This fight will never end, which Angel reiterates to Buffy when he says, "Never will. That's not why we fight. We do it because there's things worth fighting for" ("Gingerbread"). As the Slayer, Buffy is called to protect human life, but she feels a sense of hopelessness in her fight with evil.

Buffy continues to fight even when she feels hopeless because she believes this alone is her purpose; thus, she creates meaning in her calling as a Slayer. Taylor argues that the porous-self believed in the enchanted world because human minds are fallible, but now, the buffered-self elevates the human mind over everything, which is why Buffy and the other characters do not need help from the divine. According to Smith, "Significance no longer inheres in things; rather, meaning and significance are a property of minds who perceive meaning internally. The external world might be a catalyst for perceiving meaning, but the meanings are generated within the

mind” (29). Because Buffy operates within an immanent frame, transcendent meaning is no longer inherent, so Buffy must create meaning and significance through her role as a Slayer. She is a source of good that can fight against evil, and she believes she can conjure up the strength to do so on her own; she does not look for more from outside forces.

Because Buffy and the other characters have buffered selves and live within immanent frames, their source of morality comes from the social construct of this world. Throughout the show, Buffy makes it clear that the Slayer is beholden to no authority or power higher than herself. Buffy consistently deals with life or death situations, and though she has the help of her friends, she must make the final decisions. In Season Seven, Episode Five, Anya, a former member of the Scooby-gang, uses her resurrected vengeance demon powers and kills an entire fraternity. When Buffy learns about Anya’s actions, she prepares to fight and slay Anya, but Xander protests Buffy’s plan because of his connection to Anya. In response to Xander, Buffy says, “It is always different! It's always complicated. And at some point, someone has to draw the line, and that is always going to be me. You get down on me for cutting myself off, but in the end the slayer is always cut off. There's no mystical guidebook. No all-knowing council. Human rules don't apply. There's only me. I am the law” (“Selfless”). Buffy acknowledges that there is no higher power than herself, and because Buffy is the chosen one, she alone has the power, and thus, the authority to make the hard decisions in the show. Buffy frequently expresses her dislike and grief over making such decisions, but she acknowledges the power she wields and continues to perform her Slayer duties.

Buffy operates within the terms of her buffered self and disconnects from all outside forces, believing that her power and her moral understanding are enough for her to exist and thrive within this secular age. When Buffy learns about the origin of her powers, she rejects the

power and the creators of the Slayer line; she tears them down and expresses her belief that they are only men, claiming that she has enough power, so she can survive without them: “You think I came all this way to get knocked up by some demon dust? I can’t fight this. I know that now. But you guys? You’re just men. Just men who did this . . . to her. Whoever that girl was before she was the First Slayer. . . You violated that girl, made her kill for you because you’re weak, you’re pathetic, and you obviously have nothing to show me” (“Get it Done”). These men, the creators of the Slayer line, thereby lose any power they wielded (in Buffy’s estimation), which is reminiscent of Smith’s argument that “this new interest in nature can look like the next logical step on the way to pure immanence: first distinguish God/nature, then disenchant, then be happy and content with just nature and hence affirm the autonomy and sufficiency of nature” (41). Buffy acknowledges the power these men have wielded before, and that her power originated as demonic energy, but she separates herself from the men and from this demonic origin and proves that she will not accept aid from outside forces. She rejects the power these men offer her, and she rejects any authority these men had over her life as a Slayer.

The Slayer is the highest authority, and as such, the Slayer acts as a moral compass for the show. MacIntyre explains that certain “[characters] are, so to speak, the moral representatives of their culture and they are so because of the way in which moral and metaphysical ideas and theories assume through them an embodied existence in the social world” (28). Buffy is the “moral representative” of her world because demons, forces of darkness, and her friends take cues from how she presents herself. In Season One, Episode Two, Xander wants to accompany Buffy on a mission, but Buffy says, “There’s no ‘we,’ okay? I’m the Slayer, and you’re not” (“Harvest”). Buffy’s friends eventually title themselves as the Scooby-gang and acknowledge Buffy as the leader:

Buffy: You're new her, and you're wrong, because I use the power that I have. The rest of you are just waiting for me.

Xander: Well, yeah, but only because you kinda told us to. You're our leader, Buffy, as in "follow the."

Buffy: Well, from now on, I'm your leader as in "do what I say."

Xander: Ja wohl! But let's not try to forget, we're also your friends. ("Get it Done")

Buffy's leadership is unchallenged and essentially permanent. However, not only do Buffy's friends view her as a higher authority, in many episodes, vampires know what the Slayer represents, and some know that Buffy is the Slayer because the Slayer is a "moral representative" of this world. One character references the Slayer as a "boogie-man" for mythical creatures because they are either raised or told that the Slayer is The protector of humanity("Doomed"). Much like her friends take their moral understanding from her representation, the villains of each season also take their moral understanding from Buffy's moral authority. MacIntyre claims that characters perform their unique roles because a character that establishes moral definitions creates areas of disputes between those that agree and disagree with self-created moral codes (31). The "big bad" in each season either attempts to bring about an apocalypse, kill Buffy, or both, and these characters' actions provide a contrast between their vision of the world and Buffy's vision of the world, which reinforces Buffy's seemingly perfect moral code.

Buffy's moral authority, however, changes from situation to situation, which suggests an unstable moral understanding. According to MacIntyre's concept of a moral agent, Buffy does not fit the requirements: "To be a moral agent is, on this view, precisely to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgment on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view that is

totally detached from all social particularity” (31-32). Buffy’s identity as the Slayer influences her moral choices, and therefore, she is not able, in every situation, to make a decision based on a “universal and abstract point of view.” Buffy instead acts under MacIntyre’s concept of a “moral emotivist.” MacIntyre claims that “[t]he specifically modern self, the self that I have called emotivist, finds no limits set to that on which it may pass judgment for such limits could only derive from rational criteria for evaluation and, as we have seen, the emotivist self lacks any such criteria” (31). In Buffy’s world, no higher moral authority exists; thus, she must assume that role. But because she is the Slayer and the only moral authority, she must make the final moral decision in every situation whether or not her emotions may influence her decisions. In Season Two, after Angel, her then vampire boyfriend, turns evil, Buffy has the opportunity to kill him and stop him from killing others, but her emotions cloud her judgment, and she does not kill him; instead, she lets him leave, knowing that he will murder others (“Innocence”).

When characters break the moral codes that Buffy articulates, Buffy holds the power as the moral authority to decide the fate of these characters. In Season Four, Adam is the season’s “big bad,” but his actions arise in response to his understanding of humanity and morality. Adam is a confused, child-like creation who had no control over his existence, but when Adam chooses to kill humans, Buffy must stop him. Adam’s violence comes from a place of curiosity because he wants to further his understanding of humanity and his understanding of self, but “[w]ith her moral imperative comes also a strict moral structure centered on the rule that Slayers do not kill humans” (Stevenson 74). Because Buffy is the moral authority of the show, her self-affirmed moral standards inform the moral perception and understanding of other characters. Adam begins to subvert Buffy’s authority by assuming power in order to bring about a new world order. Adam reveals his beliefs as he is talking to another character, “You have no power. Not yet. Once you

forget your old life and embrace your destiny as I have, you will know power you've never dreamed of. I think you're going to like it. . . Disappointed by demon-kind, we turned to humans. Smart, adaptive, but emotional and weak. Blind. There's imperfection everywhere. Something must be done. Who will deliver us?" ("Primeval"). Adam believes that he will be the deliverance the world needs, which challenges Buffy's role as the protector of man-kind. Buffy's role as the Slayer requires her to defend human beings against Adam because she is the true protector of humanity.

However, Buffy's identity and self-understanding as the Slayer develops from season to season, and it continues to morph with every new obstacle Buffy faces. In Season One, Episode One, Buffy decides that she will not be the Slayer. Buffy runs from her duties even with the knowledge that without her help, vampires are attacking and killing humans. When Buffy finally decides to accept her role as the Slayer, she does so because she has become emotionally invested in her relationships with Willow, Xander, and Jessie. Buffy decides to do what is right because it benefits her emotionally. Buffy changes as her identity as the Slayer becomes more solid. Smith states that "in some fleeting moments of aesthetic enchantment or mundane haunting, even the secularist is pressed by a sense of something more—some 'fullness' that wells up within (or presses down upon) the managed immanent frame we've constructed in modernity" (12). When Buffy assumes her role as the Slayer and protects her friends, Buffy senses a renewed purpose in her life. This moment is a turning point for Buffy because her identity as the Slayer becomes more solidified. As Buffy faces her foes each season, she recognizes that "[s]he has a higher purpose in life, a moral responsibility fulfilled through self-denial and sacrifice" (Stevenson 111). Buffy's acknowledgement of her role as the Slayer, and her new sense of purpose, that search for "fullness," conveys the haunting pressure of transcendence. Buffy is

working towards a goal, the protection of humanity, but she is driven by the notion of purpose and meaning that she does not derive from the divine.

As Buffy assumes her role as the Slayer, she accepts this identity as her destiny; however, this destiny resembles haunting transcendence. Rhonda Wilcox examines the growth in Buffy's identity from the end of Season Two to Season Six by analyzing the names that Buffy takes throughout the show: in Season Three, Episode One, Buffy is calling herself Anne, which is "[her] middle name, and her choice of it suggests not only her wish for normality but also her wish to hide within herself and lose her pain" (62). However, in Season Six, Buffy has mystical amnesia and names herself Joan, and "[w]hen Buffy chooses her name, chooses the self to be, she chooses the name of a woman warrior who dies for her cause" (61). Buffy's self eventually identifies with someone who fights for others because she was called to do so, and this role provides a sense of significance for her buffered self that she cannot achieve any other way. This "calling" or destiny comes from the men who created the first Slayer. Throughout Seasons One through Three, Buffy references her role as the Slayer like it is a job to complete, but later, she references her Slayer status as a calling ("Conversations with Dead People"). Buffy grows throughout these seasons until she learns to accept her identity as the Slayer, which also allows her to possess a firmer moral understanding, but because this calling comes from humans and not from a divine source, her moral understanding is still founded and created within her immanent frame.

Buffy's gradual growth in understanding her identity as a Slayer and her self-articulated code of morality allows her to realize that she has a responsibility to others because of her power. Buffy learns to assume that role as she "relentlessly sacrifices her own interests in the pursuit of that duty. . . Each human life is precious, and she refuses to compromise the value of human life

in order to save herself” (Stevenson 108). However, because Buffy’s morality comes from her identity as the Slayer, her morality does not come from a universal standard and is influenced by her position and her emotions throughout the show. Buffy fully accepts her role as the highest moral authority when she accepts that being the Slayer means “she is the one who has to make life or death moral decisions and so is the one who must live with the consequences” (Stevenson 78), but she makes those decisions based on her own emotions and not on a divine source of morality, which weakens her ability to define and to follow a useful standard of morality throughout the show. Stevenson reiterates that point when he says, “Yet, in line with the difficulty of maintaining a set moral code when faced with exigencies of life, Buffy does not follow this pattern consistently” (77). In Season Five, the only way Buffy can defeat Glory<sup>2</sup> is to kill her human counterpart Ben, but when Buffy is given this chance, she refuses because to do so, would be to take a human life, which contradicts Buffy’s moral code. However, in Season Seven, when Giles asks Buffy if she would act differently in “The Gift<sup>3</sup>,” Buffy says she would sacrifice Dawn’s life for the greater good. Buffy’s moral code changes, and when it does, she has the power and authority to decide who to save and who to sacrifice. This change comes because Buffy’s morality is not stable. Her buffered self attempts to create meaning and significance within immanence, but humans are fallible, and Buffy, though she is the Slayer, is a human.

While Buffy must make the final decisions throughout the show, she does have support and encouragement from her friends. In most episodes, Buffy realizes that she needs others to help in the fight of good versus evil, but even though her friends contribute greatly to Buffy’s success, Buffy’s role and identity as the Slayer causes her to feel unconnected from them

---

<sup>2</sup> Glory is the villain of Season Five. She is a Hell God, and her only weakness is that in order to maintain her corporeal form, she must share it with a human.

<sup>3</sup> Season Five, Episode Twenty-Two, is the season final: “The Gift.” In this season finale, Buffy sacrifices her life to save Dawn’s life. Buffy dies until Willow, Xander, Anya, and Tara resurrect her in Season Six.

because Buffy believes that her authority makes her superior to others (“Conversations with Dead People”). Stevenson explains this dilemma by saying that “[t]he lesson that Buffy continually learns and relearns throughout this series is that she is not much good without her friends. Despite her physical power, they are the true source of her strength. They provide physical aid in her battles and emotional support in her life. When she wants to give up, they get her back on track” (143). However, when her friends question Buffy, Buffy overrules them: “when Buffy decides to kill Anya, Xander calls her on it. He points out the inconsistency of her not killing Willow when she turned evil, but now wanting to kill Anya. The issue here is how emotional attachments can cloud moral judgement” (Stevenson 78). Though Buffy has become more stable in her identity as the Slayer, her moral understanding will never become completely stable because it will always be influenced by her self-directed identity. Without access to transcendence, Buffy is trapping herself in immanent modes of being, and “the longer she lives in her world, the more complex those concepts [of right and wrong good and evil] become” (Stevenson 80). This concept is reiterated when Buffy experiences transcendence in death at the end of Season Five because after Buffy experiences a type of transcendence, the haunting pressure of transcendence is more apparent, but Buffy continues to follow her self-created moral codes, which begin to deteriorate.

Before Buffy dies in Season Five, she feels unfulfilled in her calling; her purposelessness overwhelms her. Death is one major theme in Buffy; from being written on the blackboard in the first episode (“Welcome to the Hellmouth”), to becoming Buffy’s gift in Season Five, death plays a pivotal role in Buffy’s identity. In Season One, Buffy runs away from death because she

wants to live<sup>4</sup>. However, as Buffy settles into her role as Slayer, she starts to welcome death into her life. After Buffy loses to a vampire, she asks Spike to tell her how he bested two Slayers in his past. Spike says, “That final gasp. That look of peace. Part of you is desperate to know: What’s it like? Where does it lead you? And now you see, that’s the secret. Not the punch you didn’t throw or the kicks you didn’t land. Every Slayer has a death wish” (“Fool for Love”). In a mystical quest, the First Slayer tells Buffy that “death is [her] gift” (“Intervention”). Buffy rejects this idea because even though she slays vampires and other evil forces, she believes that death cannot be a gift. However, in “The Weight of the World,” Buffy admits that, for only a moment, she gave up and wished for everything to end: “in [that] fifth season, we also see her coming to terms with the fact that some part of her actually longs to die, to lay down the lonely burden of being the Slayer and find some peace” (Reiss 34). Though Buffy has a calling as the Slayer, this calling is given meaning through Buffy’s buffered self, which keeps Buffy from having a higher purpose.

Buffy experiences a type of transcendence when she dies at the end of Season Five; her soul goes to a heavenly dimension where she is rewarded for defending others as the Slayer. Buffy is at peace until her friends resurrect her from the dead, but Buffy has changed after she experiences transcendence: “Her body is resurrected, but not her spirit. Although physically alive, Buffy shuffles through season six emotionally and spiritually dead” (Stevenson 170). When she dies in Season Five and then is brought back in Season Six, Buffy does not understand why she is back. She does not understand her purpose as she did before because she reached a level of transcendence and meaning and then was pulled back into immanence where meaning

---

<sup>4</sup> In Season One, a prophecy foretells Buffy’s death at the hands of the Master, an ancient vampire that rules over the other vampires in Sunnydale.

and significance are created by the mind and her buffered self. The show celebrates immanence, but Buffy's emotional and spiritual turmoil in Season Six suggests that though the show celebrates immanence, it subconsciously acknowledges that transcendence is necessary for true significance and meaning.

Buffy's uncertainty in her role as the Slayer and her apathy results in poor choices: "she thinks she has 'come back different' because Spike can hit her<sup>5</sup> or that she 'left something' of herself in the grave because she feels so empty. She chooses a physical relationship with Spike both to punish herself and to make herself 'feel something' ("Smashed"). She chooses to ignore Dawn, to use Giles as a teenager uses an indulgent parent, and to deceive her friends" (Dial Driver 11). Before her death, Buffy understood her role and her power as the highest moral authority, but after she dies and her power is stripped from her, she is at peace in Heaven. When she is pulled out of transcendence and back to the mundane, immanent frame of her life, Buffy realizes how unstable her morality and identity has always been within the social construct she inhabits. In Season Six, Buffy sings<sup>6</sup> about the lack of meaning she finds in her role as the Slayer and in the self-created moral standards that she has followed:

Every single night, the same arrangement/  
I go out and fight the fight/  
Still I always feel  
the strange estrangement/  
Nothing here is real, nothing here is right/  
I've been making  
shows of trading blows/  
Just hoping no one knows/  
That I've been going through the  
motions/  
Walking through the part/  
Nothing seems to penetrate my heart/  
I was always  
brave, and kind of righteous/  
Now I find I'm wavering/  
Crawl out of your grave, you'll  
find this fight just/  
Doesn't mean a thing. ("Once More, With Feeling")

---

<sup>5</sup> In Season Four, the Initiative (a government agency) implants a chip in Spike's head that restricts his ability to harm humans. He is unable to bite or harm a human in any way, but he is still able to harm demons.

<sup>6</sup> Season Six, Episode Seven is a musical episode.

She does not fully begin to live again until she reconnects fully with her identity as the Slayer and resumes her role within the world; she must fully reconnect with immanence. Buffy, after her resurrection, feels haunted by transcendence, but because she operates within her buffered self, she must assume her previous self-created moral standards even though she feels that those standards and life is purposeless.

Buffy experiences a type of transcendence when she enters a heavenly dimension, but when she is brought back to earth, she once again attempts to find meaning within her life and actions. Buffy's death and resurrection is significant to the show's belief or unbelief in a divine source of good. Though the show celebrates immanence, when Buffy is resurrected, her actions prove that transcendence is necessary for a character to experience true significance since Buffy only felt "complete" when she was in a heavenly dimension ("Afterlife"). Wilcox explains *Buffy's* attitude towards transcendence and, unknowingly, the buffered self:

Fantasy though it is, *Buffy* does not recommend unattainable transcendence; though the series recognizes the longing for it, it is not about the infinite unnamable. We must live in our single selves, and our free will is represented in the choice of the name we claim, the self we inhabit. Where the name is accepted or created, this series repeatedly equates naming with existential choice. And in a series with characters like Faith, Angel, Dawn, and Will, perhaps the most significant symbolism is that the given name of its greatest hero is irreducibly human. (63)

Power must come from the human mind because as Smith says, "meaning and significance are a property of minds who perceive meaning internally" (29). However, like Wilcox says, *Buffy* yearns for something more. Buffy wants more, but her buffered self keeps her from accepting transcendence, and according to Smith, "what should interest us are these fugitive expressions of

doubt *and* longing, faith *and* questioning. These lived expressions of ‘cross-pressure’ are at the heart of the secular” (14). Throughout the seven seasons, Buffy grows into an identity that gives her more power than any other character, yet Buffy is never truly happy. She can never reach her full potential and reach “fullness.” Buffy questions and longs for more than her calling; she longs for a higher purpose that the buffered self can never give her.

Buffy’s death in Season Five indicates the connection Buffy’s identity has with her own created code of morality, and it underscores the instability that is born out of an understanding of selfhood, which is not founded in the divine. The characters of *Buffy* work within their immanent frames, and “[r]ather than rely on miraculous or divine aid, human beings in *Buffy*’s world either find or fail to find the strength within themselves to fight evil, to forgive, or to achieve redemption” (Stevenson 70). The show and its characters acknowledge the supernatural, but they refuse to accept transcendence. It is up to the characters to save the world without reliance on divine intervention.

Consequently, Buffy’s inability to fill her life with significance causes her moral understanding to break down over time. Though the show portrays Buffy as the highest moral authority, it also illustrates the changes she makes to those moral standards, which displays the instability of Buffy’s moral identity. Though the show wants to postulate that Buffy and the other characters can find significance, morals, and meaning through their own work, the show also depicts the fractured state of a moral understanding and significance when Buffy tries to fight for it on her own.

## Chapter Two - Losing Faith: The Buffered Self as Fragmented Identity

*“When are you gonna learn, B? It doesn’t matter what kind of vibe you get off a person. Cause nine times out of ten, the face they’re showing you is not the real one”*

-Faith (“Consequences”).

While each character in *Buffy* operates as a buffered self, the buffered self affects each character differently. Buffy is haunted by transcendence, and she assumes the role of moral authority because of her role as the Slayer. Faith, on the other hand, operates as a buffered self differently even though she and Buffy are both Slayers. Without transcendence, the buffered self creates its own moral codes to follow, but Faith rejects all moral codes, divine or self-created. While Buffy creates, and follows, her own moral standards, Faith abuses power, which causes Faith to separate herself from others. Because Faith does not follow any sort of moral code, her identity as a Slayer begins to deteriorate. Faith and Buffy act as opposites in this way because Buffy uses her power to create a foundation for moral understanding, but Faith uses her power based on her impulses. Faith’s buffered self specifically highlights the effects the buffered self can cause on Faith’s identity as the Slayer when she rejects transcendence, and in turn, rejects all forms of moral standards. Therefore, Faith’s actions and choices rely on her chosen identity, but without any source of moral standards, divine or other, her identity is not solid; it can change, which causes her identity to become fragmented.

Faith, when she enters the show in Season Three, is a new Slayer that acts as a dark version of Buffy, which also portrays the effects of the buffered self. In the show, one Slayer exists to protect the world from dark forces, but when Buffy dies in Season One, a new Slayer is called, and from that time on, two Slayers exist. Rhonda Wilcox establishes Faith as the antithesis of Buffy. Wilcox says that “Faith herself is never simplistically demonized, but clearly

she, in her promiscuity and violence, represents the shadow self that Buffy could become. And that self contains murder” (14). This contrast between Faith and Buffy lies largely in the differences between how Faith and Buffy deal with and understand their given or self-determined identities as Slayers. Buffy, as the moral authority in the show, creates moral codes that the characters follow to be considered good, but Faith operates on the understanding that her powers give her license to act and live however she sees fit; the law, including Buffy’s moral codes, do not apply to Faith. In Season Three, Faith says, “When are ya gonna get this, B? Life for a Slayer is very simple. Want, take, have” (“Bad Girls”). Faith exists as a buffered self, which causes her to believe that she can find meaning without the codes that others follow, but Faith’s ideology is skewed because she is acting without a moral foundation of any kind. While Buffy has a moral foundation, albeit self-created and fallible, Faith does not have any moral foundation on which to base her actions and choices.

Faith’s attitude towards her identity, that as a Slayer, she has no limitations, causes her identity to increasingly fragment throughout the show; while other characters have established a moral understanding in response to Buffy’s moral codes, Faith establishes her moral understanding on her experience as a Slayer, and because of this, Faith loses her sense of self. Faith, like several other characters on *Buffy*, is on a journey of discovery to understand herself. Emily Dial-Driver explains that the characters in *Buffy* determine who they are by surviving difficulties and grief, which helps the characters discover more about themselves (12). Though she essentially discards Buffy’s moral codes, this is the first time Faith displays her true lack of a moral foundation. Because Faith operates on a “want, take, have” mentality, she eventually kills a human, which further fragments her identity. This fragmentation occurs because she acknowledges her rejection of moral standards when she tells Buffy that she “doesn’t care” about

the murder even though she has a guilty expression on her face (“Bad Girls”). As a Slayer, Buffy’s sole purpose is to protect humans, which is what all Slayers are supposed to do when called. But Faith, refusing to follow other moral codes, breaks the most important moral code and kills the deputy mayor in Season Three. Faith’s murder of a human, and choice to overlook her bad decisions, provides a distinction between the effects the buffered self has had on each character. Faith chooses to follow no moral codes, while Buffy chooses to create moral codes, but both Buffy and Faith are buffered because they make these choices as a result of their rejection of transcendence.

When Faith first enters the show, she sets herself apart from Buffy and the Scoobies by presenting herself as entirely self-sufficient and individual minded instead of community oriented. Faith assumes power as soon as she meets Buffy by presenting herself as smart and capable. As Buffy, not knowing who Faith is, tries to save Faith from a vampire, Faith, knowing who Buffy is, takes control of the situation and lightly mocks Buffy with the knowledge by saying, “Thanks, B. Couldn’t have done it without you,” displaying a certain superiority that Faith believes she has over Buffy (“Faith, Hope, and Trick”). By presenting herself in this light and displaying a love of power, Faith initially intrigues Buffy and the Scoobies.

However, because Faith’s entire identity revolves around being a Slayer, she believes that her power sets her apart from others morally, much like Buffy does; however, Faith chooses to abuse her power instead of holding herself to self-created moral codes: “The corrupting influence of power for Faith is tied to the belief that power breeds superiority. . . Faith’s physical superiority, however, has bred in her a sense of moral superiority” (Stevenson 119). As a result of this ideology, Faith’s moral decision making becomes skewed. Faith believes that her supernatural abilities give her the freedom to break any law that she chooses. In the world of

*Buffy*, Dial-Driver explains that “[m]aking good choices means morality. We know what is right and wrong” (17). However, knowing right from wrong does not guarantee that one will make the right choice; it simply offers the chance to do so. Faith understands that what she is doing is against the law, and is therefore considered wrong, but she chooses to make a morally bad decision because her identity as the Slayer informs her morality; she chooses to establish her moral understanding in relation to power versus self-created or Buffy’s moral codes.

Faith’s murder of the deputy mayor is the moment that Faith chooses to permanently separate herself from Buffy and the others in order to continue down a path of darkness. Dial-Driver says “that Whedon finds choice an important part of consciousness” (10), and Faith chooses to become the Dark Slayer because without a moral foundation, Faith has no basis on which to make right choices. She makes choices based on her wants and desires. The characters have the ability to choose who they are; they choose what experiences are able to define them, and Faith makes a choice when she kills the deputy mayor. After the murder, Buffy confronts Faith to offer her help and support, but Faith has destroyed the evidence, and she tells Buffy “No, you don’t get it. I don’t care” (“Bad Girls”). Faith’s identity shifts from being a Slayer, a sworn protector of human beings, to being a Slayer that has killed a human, and Faith chooses to allow this shift to happen. She does not confront her choices; instead, her choices define her, and she follows the shift in identity that these choices create. Through rejecting transcendence, Faith also avoids other types of moral standards, and she continues to search for fullness in her identity as it continues to shift throughout the show. Faith believes she can fix the problem she created and move on with her life by dumping the body, but by choosing to hide evidence rather than admit to guilt, her identity becomes more fragmented because by rejecting any source of moral

standards, Faith bases her actions and choices on her identity, which is constantly in flux, and, thus, her moral understanding continues to decrease until she becomes a villain in the show.

Faith continues to make immoral decisions that progressively become worse, leading Faith down a path where her identity becomes even more unstable and disconnected from any essential morality because she begins to lose her identity. She is no longer a Slayer that protects others. Instead of acknowledging her flaws, Faith changes her persona to reflect her newfound status as a foe and starts distancing herself from Buffy. Stevenson says that “[w]hen Faith breaks away from Buffy she joins another community, that of the Mayor, but this new community leads her down a path of immorality” (145). Faith cannot find meaning as a Slayer, so she reverts to the other “side” and attempts to find meaning there. By joining the Mayor, the “Big Bad” of Season Three, Faith is continuing to establish herself as an “evil” person, and she chooses to follow the Mayor to further her own agenda. Faith is desperate to find purpose, and according to Helford, “Intense guilt and self-loathing that she cloaks as anger begin to dominate Faith’s personality after she and Buffy grow apart” (31). Faith’s refusal to accept guilt or to acknowledge what she has done splinters Faith’s identity further.

Faith continues to make choices that affect her identity throughout *Buffy*, but these choices are always steeped in the comprehension that she alone can shape the significance of her own life. Each time Faith experiences an identity crisis, she does so because she is attempting to find fulfillment in her life. Dial-Driver reiterates this idea when she references Victor Frankl: “Each of the major characters in *Buffy* determines his/her ‘self,’ sometimes acting as ‘swine,’ other times as ‘saints.’ At each moment, who they are is in a state of determination: ‘Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next

moment” (13)<sup>7</sup>. Faith operates within the terms of a buffered self because she attempts to find significance and fullness in her life without the help of the divine or anyone else. Though Faith works with Buffy for a time, Faith claims that she can only trust herself: “Yeah, well, you can’t trust people. I should’ve learned that by now. . . *I’m* on my side, and that’s enough” (“Revelations”). Because turning to the divine and transcendence is not an option for Faith, her identity is fragmented and unstable because she relies on it to guide her, but she has no moral foundation for support, while Buffy has a self-created moral foundation.

When Faith fails as a Slayer, she decides to start working for the Mayor in order to create meaning and purpose in her life, but aligning herself with the Mayor only draws Faith further into darkness. Mayor Wilkins provides Faith with a sense of purposefulness, which Faith could not provide for herself, but “[Faith] has become part of the worst version of unquestioning service of the power structure for the sake of approval, comfort, and support of the father. The mayor feeds Faith, dresses her, and buys her toys (a Playstation; an especially vicious knife)” (Wilcox 14). Faith, as seen above, consistently uses her identity to establish her moral understanding, and when she begins working for the Mayor, Faith begins placing her identity in her actions and interactions with the Mayor. He becomes her lifeline, but as a demon, the Mayor is another unstable source for her identity. Faith never accepts moral codes, but by following the Mayor, she is attempting to conform to the Mayor’s ideologies, and thus, his moral codes, but as Smith argues, individually constructed codes are not strong enough for someone to place her moral foundation on (128). Though Faith does not claim her own moral standards or follow other’s moral standards, by changing her identity to fit the current situation, working with Buffy

---

<sup>7</sup> Emily Dial-Driver uses Philosopher Victor Frankl to “illuminate issues in *Buffy*. . . Frankl, along with a number of other philosophers, deals with choice” (9). Dial-Driver’s application of Frankl’s philosophy further proves that in the *Buffy*verse, the characters place their identity in their own choices instead of a higher authority.

or working with the Slayer, she is conforming to each person's principles until she changes her identity again.

Faith's identity fluctuates from Slayer to villain and, then, back to Slayer because Faith is searching for meaning and significance in her life, but she was unsuccessful in her previous experiences, so she continues to allow her choices to change her identity and follows that identity in search of significance. Because she was unsuccessful as a Slayer and as a villain, Faith tries to find significance through Buffy by becoming her; if her identity has not worked thus far, maybe Buffy's will. Faith wants what Buffy has, so she tries to take it from Buffy in Season Four. When Faith wakes up from her coma<sup>8</sup>, she finds a gift the Mayor has left for her, and this gift mystically switches Faith's and Buffy's bodies. Faith, in turn, begins to mock Buffy and Buffy's life, but "as people continue to treat [Faith] as if she were Buffy—to treat her with love, affection, and support—she begins to genuinely act like Buffy, fulfilling Buffy's earlier comment, 'different circumstances, that could be me' ("Doppelgangland"). . . [however,] Faith is still trying to fight alone" (Wilcox 16). Faith experiences a community of people who empower her, but Faith resists this community because she uses her identity to guide her actions and choices. Buffy and Faith are both buffered, but while Buffy creates her own moral codes, Faith chooses not to follow moral codes. Thus, Faith's identity has no foundation and consistently changes. Through these changes, Faith loses her sense of self, and, thus, her ability to connect to others.

Faith relies only on herself and cares only for herself until she experiences the life that Buffy has. Faith gains a small understanding of what she could have if she acquired a more stable identity by following some basis of moral codes like Buffy's self-created moral standards.

---

<sup>8</sup> At the end of Season Three, Buffy stabs Faith, and Faith falls into a coma for 8 months.

She would gain a more stable sense of morality since Faith has no foundation for morality at all. Faith never cares about more than the here and now. She is undeniably focused on herself and the world around her, a focus, which Smith explains, is normal, for “[in modernity,] you can drop the expectations of eternity that place the weight of virtue on our domestic lives—that is, you can stop being burdened by what eternity/salvation demands and simply frame ultimate flourishing within this world” (33). Faith’s intrusion into Buffy’s life shows her how fractured her own identity is because Faith finally realizes that her Slayer status, her foray into evil, and even Buffy herself cannot give her fullness in life. When Faith in Buffy’s body sees her own body, she flies into a rage and attacks herself. Faith yells as she punches her body, “You’re nothing! Disgusting! Murderous bitch! You’re nothing! You’re disgusting!” (“Who Are You”). Faith is disgusted by herself, by her lack of identity, because she believes she is “nothing.” By confronting herself, Faith acknowledges that her identity is in pieces.

Faith’s choices and actions over the course of the show fractures and destabilizes her identity at every major event that she experiences until she finally realizes that she hates the person she has become. Her identity is in tatters, and her emotions overwhelm her at every turn. Dial-Driver explains that “if a person cannot find meaning in his/her self, that person will seek meaning outside of the self and turn to a ‘community’ which instructs that person in how to think and feel and act” (19). However, Faith only truly experiences this community while she is in Buffy’s body, which forces Faith to continue to reject any sort of community because she is experiences community as Buffy, not as herself; Faith’s identity, or lack thereof, continues to influence her to trust only herself. Faith continues to fight only for herself, trying to find fullness and significance in her life, but she cannot. Through Buffy, Faith experiences the power of having a foundation for a moral understanding. Though Buffy’s moral code is not divinely given,

it allows Faith to experience more stability than she has had in the past; however, without her own stable identity and morality, Faith will never find peace in herself.

Within *Buffy*, Faith is not able to develop a strong sense of morality until she is borrowing Buffy's moral code, but in terms of the world outside of the *Buffyverse*, in what Taylor labels the secular age, Faith cannot develop a strong sense of morality because of her buffered self. Stevenson says, "It is noteworthy that [Faith] defines the essence of Buffy in terms of a moral code" (121) because in *Buffy*, Buffy is a higher authority when it comes to morality. While Faith is in Buffy's body, she experiences the love, understanding, and commitment that others have towards Buffy, and she relates her own lack of these things to her lack of "goodness." Stevenson also explains that "[i]t is here that she confesses the truth about herself and begins to experience the weight of moral responsibility. Through her identification with Buffy, Faith has acquired a moral compass" (Stevenson 122). Without Buffy, Faith cannot develop a moral understanding, but even with Buffy and a moral understanding made possible by adhering to Buffy's moral codes, Faith is never truly satisfied with the meaning and significance in her life. Faith believes she can find significance on her own; in the *Buffyverse*, this corresponds with saving the world as a Slayer, which reflects Taylor's concept of the buffered self as a person who attempts to find fullness within her immanent frame. However, without the divine, Faith cannot find this significance in her life.

Faith's inability to gain a stable identity is reinforced when Faith returns to *Buffy* in Season Seven. In this season, Faith has reformed and is now working with Buffy to stop the Big Bad of Season Seven. However, while Faith chooses to fight on the side of good and chooses to help others, she still displays insecurity in herself and in her decision-making abilities. When the Potential Slayers, Scoobies, and Faith demote Buffy, Faith reluctantly takes Buffy's place as

leader. Faith mentions in multiple episodes that she does not believe that she has the strength to lead because she is newly reformed (“Empty Places,” “End of Days”). Faith’s insecurity underscores the fact that even though Faith has pieced herself back together, her identity is still unstable. Faith’s identity has transformed from being anger-driven to being constructed via a desire for redemption after she tries to repent from the wrongdoings she committed in the past. As a result, she is a stronger person, but overall, Faith’s identity is still not founded in the divine and therefore cannot be stable.

The characters of *Buffy* each have buffered selves, but Faith’s journey in the show establishes the series itself as a product of the secular age. *Buffy* documents Faith’s story, and by the end of the show, Faith is a redeemed character, but the redemption of Faith is flawed because Faith does not feel fit to lead or to make decisions. Faith is able to develop morality only after she reaches out for others and confronts her past, but even then, Faith cannot achieve a stable identity and sense of morality without transcendence though the show portrays it otherwise. According to Money, “The most serious attempt at rehabilitation is that of Faith. For all her toughness and amoral brutality, she has always been fragile in her unadmitted neediness for love and her denial of her own worth” (104). Whedon celebrates identity found within, seeing as many of his characters find enlightenment through personal experiences and struggles—Faith comes back in Season Seven with a renewed sense of self after struggling with her identity throughout Season Three and Season Four—yet Faith comes back insecure and ultimately unstable, which reveals Whedon’s critique about how a person, or a character, can place identity in the wrong people and experiences. This mirrors Taylor’s perception of spirituality within this secular age because Faith is never content. She is consistently searching for more, and she does this through her own individual experiences and her identity:

It is first worth noting that a desire for ‘the spiritual’ endures. ‘This often springs from a profound dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order’ (p. 506). . .

As a result, [the Age of Authenticity] spirituality is a quest for the individual. Nothing is given or axiomatic anymore, so one has to ‘find’ one’s faith: ‘I have to discover my route to wholeness and spiritual depth. The focus is on the individual, and on his/her experience.’ (Smith 89)

The show portrays Faith’s redemptive arc as complete, yet Faith has still not reached the full potential for herself. Even after her redemption, she is still unsure of her place in *Buffy*.

In *Buffy*, the characters, to be good, follow moral codes, and when Faith is redeemed in the show, she is following these moral codes, but Faith’s discontent in the show displays the show’s unintentional observation that the humanly fashioned moral codes are not strong enough to serve as a grounding moral source. Wilcox explains that “[f]or *Buffy*’s Faith, the doubt resides not only within viewers but also within the character: for a considerable time in the series, Faith doubts her own goodness—or believes that she is evil. She eventually finds faith in herself and willingness to atone for wrongdoing” (49). However, this doubt continues even when Faith is considered redeemed within the show. Stevenson details Faith’s journey and specifies that the contrast between Faith and Buffy is solely based on the fact that Faith does not have Buffy’s moral understanding (118). Stevenson’s emphasis on Faith’s lack of Buffy’s moral compass establishes that in *Buffy*, morality is based on Buffy and Buffy’s moral understanding, especially in regards to Faith since Faith represents the antithesis of Buffy. Stevenson continues his analysis of Faith when he says, “Faith’s subsequent descent into evil is the result of her failure to accept moral responsibility for her actions. Her journey towards redemption is therefore a journey towards a deeper moral understanding of her identity” (Stevenson 120). However, Faith does not

have any moral codes on which to base a moral understanding or culpability. Faith cannot hold herself morally responsible without some moral foundation.

However, Faith cannot achieve a deeper understanding of *her* morality; instead, it is a deeper understanding of Buffy's moral understanding that Faith requires, and only when she achieves this in Season Four does Faith admit to the self-hatred she harbors. Helford echoes this point when she says, "Clearly, Faith is no longer having fun; she has made plain to herself, to Buffy, and to viewers that she hates herself far more than she hates Buffy. Despite what may seem an 'uptight' and rigid life for Buffy, it is Faith who is truly joyless" (33). In *Buffy*, Faith cannot find significance within her immanent frame until she accepts Buffy as a higher power, but even with Buffy's moral understanding, even when Faith redeems herself within the show, she still cannot reach fullness in her life because more than Buffy or self-earned redemption is required for a stable identity because even Buffy's self-created moral standards are not a divine, universal set of moral codes. Without help from a divine power, Faith cannot become stable in herself, and, therefore, she will never develop a strong sense of morality that is founded in more than human fallibility and human perception of right and wrong.

In the show, characters are meant to find strength in themselves; they are meant to create meaning through their own powers. This need to focus on the individual illustrates the role of the buffered self for each character, and Faith especially focuses on the individual because she trusts no one but herself, but the show also requires that the characters follow a specific set of rules because Buffy is the highest moral authority. When Faith does not follow those codes, she is a villain, but when she reforms and does follow those codes, the show redeems her and brings her back into the fold as a good character. This cycle for Faith proves that each character can solve her own problems and create significance for herself; however, Faith does not create significance

for herself, and, in fact, Faith is discontent and unsure of herself as a redeemed character. If her redemption were complete, Faith would be a strong force of good and would have a stable moral understanding, but the show's illustration of Faith as weak and confused displays a sense that Faith cannot reach true significance without a stronger moral foundation.

### Chapter Three - The Soulful Undead: Spike's Dissatisfied Fulfillment

*"Yeah, I went to great lengths. Lots of trouble, and now I'm unique. Well, more or less. Got myself a soul, whatever that means"*

-Spike ("Get it Done").

Buffy and Faith exemplify the effects a buffered self can have on one's identity. The buffered self works within a person's immanent frame to achieve fullness in life. Both Buffy and Faith attempt to find meaning through their roles as Slayers. However, the autonomous self cuts the individual off from a universal, transcendent standard of morality, leaving him or her with only a subjective ethical code, which Buffy chooses to follow and Faith does not. A stable moral understanding, in this case, represents the understanding of right and wrong, good and evil that is gained through transcendence and interaction with the divine.

While the problem of morality and identity in regards to any *Buffy* character is complex, Spike's morality is more complicated than that of the other characters. With other characters, their morality is created through recourse to their buffered selves; however, Spike's moral understanding is gained through other's definition of morality. Spike's buffered self is unique because within a buffered self, one attempts to achieve fullness through his or her own works and achievements, but as a vampire, Spike is a soulless demon and does not try to achieve fullness until the end of the show. Instead, Spike's earthly and emotional desires motivate him. Spike's moral understanding is almost always defined by other characters or within his immanent frame, which demonstrates the lack of stability one has without access to transcendence. Spike demonstrates the fragmentation that the buffered self causes to one's identity and morality because he is motivated by emotions and not moral codes, and his soul does not have inherent significance and meaning.

Spike's identity aligns him with Taylor's disenchanted world and the buffered self because he is a vampire that is hyperaware of his emotions. Vampires are demons that take over a human body, and as a rule, vampires are stagnant creatures that only bring death and destruction to those around them. Spike fits within the disenchanted world because even though he is a demon inside of a human body, Spike keeps the personality and characteristics of the human he killed, and he is portrayed as more human than other demons. Throughout *Buffy*, only two vampires have every been considered good at some point in the Seven Seasons: Angel and Spike. Angel is considered good because he has a soul, but before he gains his soul, he is a demon with no humanity ("Innocence"). However, there are multiple flashback episodes that provide greater insight into Spike while he was still human, conveying the sense that Spike has kept some of his humanity. This is an instance where the show uses transcendental concepts and fashions them into a disenchanted world. In Season Two, Episode Three, when Angel says, "Things change," Spike says, "Not us! Not demons!" ("School Hard"). According to the show, when a vampire takes over a human body, the demon inside roams the earth with the sole purpose to kill and destroy because demons have no greater purpose.

Spike, however, connects with his emotions more than other demons. When Spike is heartbroken over Drusilla in Season Three, his emotions change rapidly from sad to angry, and he attempts to drown his emotions in alcohol. It is not until he fights with other vampires that he rouses from his depressed state, and the adrenaline of the fight allows good emotions to overcome the negative emotions. Instead of drunkenly wallowing, Spike decides to "torture [Drusilla] until she likes [him] again" because the fight "puts things in perspective" ("Lover's Walk"). Spike reacts towards events in his life based on the present moment, which places him, like the other characters on the show, within Taylor's concept of the immanent frame, but more

specifically, Spike is buffered because his humanity blocks him from transcendence; Spike is not as demonic as the other demons.

Spike is unique because while he is a demon with no soul, he connects with his emotions, which grants him human-like qualities; however, Spike is still not as human as Buffy and her friends, so Spike's drive in life is purely based on his emotions. In Season Two, for example, when Spike first appears in *Buffy*, his love for Drusilla is apparent through his interactions with her. In "School Hard," as Spike is threatening other vampires and claiming dominance over the vampires in Sunnydale, his vampire face is present, but as soon as Drusilla walks into the room, Spike withdraws his demonic face to display his human visage; this action represents Spike's tenderness towards Drusilla. Herman explains the uniqueness that, for a vampire that is famous for his soullessness, Spike still connects, naively, to his emotions and forms bonds with unlikely characters such as Buffy ("*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Dichotomy of Self"). Spike is a mythical creature, a soulless demon, but despite appearing to be a being that would belong to an enchanted world, he grounds himself through his emotions and operates like a disenchanting being. Spike's emotions represent his buffered self, and these emotions give him a semblance of fullness because according to the show, Spike will never be able to strive for true significance and meaning without a soul. Taylor argues that people are generally viewed as more significant than other beings because they are connected with something more like the image of God or a soul, and many cultures, when they consider someone to be less than they should be, believe so because the person does not have a soul (5). Without his soul, Spike's desires motivate him, and he modifies his actions, so he can reach his desires, but this absence of a soul causes other characters to treat Spike as a lesser being.

Because Spike is hyperaware of his emotions and modifies his actions to achieve his desires, Spike appears to make moral decisions, but his decisions are based on his impulses not on morals. Smith explains that people within this secular age consistently feel, then feed, their desires (68). He also mentions that one's drive is necessary to understand one's moral values (Smith 126). Spike's emotions and desires drive him to feed these desires at any cost. Vampires can feel emotion, but most vampires do not feel emotion to the same intensity that Spike feels it. In Season Five, Episode Fourteen, Drusilla confirms that demons still have the capacity to feel love when she says, "Oh, we can, you know. We can love quite well if not wisely" ("Crush"). Spike's love for Drusilla causes him to betray Drusilla and help Buffy in Season Two, but Drusilla's love for Spike is not enough for her when she finds out what Spike has done. In Season Two, Episode Twenty-Two, Spike offers to help Buffy stop Angel and Drusilla from ending the world because he prefers the world to stay the same, and he wants to save himself and Drusilla ("Becoming, Part 2"). Spike makes a good choice and helps save the world, but this choice is based on his desire to kill humans and his love for Drusilla; his motivations are not based on the higher moral code established within the world of *Buffy*, which is protecting humanity, and it is not based on a true moral understanding founded in a divine source.

Spike continues to make seemingly good choices, but these choices all benefit him or emerge in response to his moment to moment emotional motivations. When Spike falls in love with Buffy, he protects Dawn and fights alongside Buffy. In Season Five, Episode Eighteen, Glory kidnaps and tortures Spike in order to retrieve information about Dawn, but Spike refuses to answer Glory's questions to spare Buffy from pain. Spike says, "Anything happened to Dawn, it'd destroy her. I couldn't live, her being in that much pain" ("Intervention"). Spike's love for Buffy motivates him to act in a way that will not cause her pain, but his actions are based on his

emotions, not on a moral understanding. Spike's emotional urges towards Buffy are unhealthy because they are self-centered instead of other-centered. This distinction is made clear in Season Six when Spike and Buffy begin a sexual relationship with each other. In Season Six, Buffy has recently been raised from the dead and pulled out of a heavenly dimension; she is noticeably emotionally fragile because she is struggling to resume normal life. Her reentry into the earthly dimension is jarring, which causes Buffy to battle depression: "Wherever I was, I was happy. I think I was in heaven. I was torn out of there by my friends. Everything here is hard and violent. This is hell" ("Flooded"). Even though Buffy is visibly traumatized, Spike still pursues and encourages an unhealthy sexual relationship with her.

Spike's motivation for the last few seasons in the series had been to achieve Buffy's love, so once he has her love in some form, he cares less about her emotional well-being. This shift in Spike's actions is noticeable in Season Five while Buffy is dealing with her mom's illness. Spike comforts Buffy because his love for her requires that he ease her pain until she acknowledges his love ("Fool for Love"). However, once she acknowledges his feelings towards her by entering a relationship with him, he focuses only on keeping the relationship alive. After beginning this relationship with Buffy, Spike begins to stalk Buffy and pushes for their connection to continue. Spike frequently shows up at Buffy's house or place of work pressing Buffy to continue this relationship even though the relationship with Spike is hindering Buffy's relationship with others ("Doublemeat Palace," "Dead Things"). Spike's actions in each instance are a result of his zealous desire for Buffy's love. Spike is not making good decisions based on a larger moral framework beyond those impulses.

In fact, according to the logic of the show and the statements of its characters, Spike cannot have a moral understanding or make moral decisions without a soul. In Season One, Giles

explains that vampires are demons inside of a human body: “A vampire isn’t a person at all. It may have the movements, the memories, even the personality of the person that it took over, but it’s still a demon at the core. There is no halfway” (“Angel”). However, the show frequently provides flashbacks of Spike as a human, but if the demon took over the body, these flashbacks would not be necessary, so the show contradicts itself because Spike does keep some of his humanity (“Fool for Love,” “Lies My Parents Told Me”). Angel takes this idea further and explains that not only is a vampire a demon, but as a demon, a vampire does not have a soul: “When you become a vampire, the demon takes your body, but it doesn’t get your soul. That’s gone. No conscience, no remorse” (“Angel”). However, Spike retains a semblance of his humanity, which keeps him within the disenchanted world, though without a soul, demons have no understanding of right and wrong, and it is impossible for them to make morally right decisions. Spike might have some humanity, but he is still a demon, and he still, according to the show, requires a soul. Stevenson says, “Goodness on *Buffy* is not defined as the mere absence of evil. Rather, it is intrinsically tied to the presence of a soul” (87). Since Spike does not have a soul, even though Spike is making good decisions, he cannot, by definition, be good.

Spike’s motivations are based exclusively on his emotions and desire, and in this secular age, “such” moral codes determine someone’s moral understanding. Smith argues that “to not meet these expectations [of a modern moral understanding] is not only to be abnormal but almost inhuman” (126). So, Spike’s lack of a soul causes the other characters to perceive him as nothing more than an animal or “an evil, disgusting thing” (“Smashed”). Consequently, Spike’s actions prove that without a soul he cannot be good because when he gains an aspect of Buffy’s love through a sexual relationship with her, but then loses this relationship, he attempts to rape Buffy

to force her to love him: “Let yourself love me” (“Seeing Red”). Spike is so focused on gaining Buffy’s love back that he does not care if he hurts her.

Spike needs a stable moral understanding before he can make morally good decisions, and according to the show, Spike must have a soul to achieve moral understanding; however, the moral code or understanding that the show and its characters operate by is not enough for a complete and stable moral understanding. According to Smith, “codes are inadequate as moral sources” because they are man-made (128). The show requires that Spike get a soul in order for him to become good, but with a soul, Spike will still only be following these man-made codes. Gwyn Symonds recognizes that “Executive Producer, Marti Noxon, has acknowledged that there was a need to counter audience sympathy for Spike by having him attempt to rape Buffy in order to give the character a moral imperative to seek a soul” (“Little More Soul”). Spike understands that what he has done is wrong, but only in the context that he has irreparably damaged his relationship with Buffy, and that relationship was the only motivation for his good actions. Wilcox explains that this scene exists to allow Spike to understand his immoral actions towards Buffy, but it is also for the viewers to understand that Spike cannot be good without a soul. She explains that Spike’s realization only occurs because of his relationship with Buffy, and this detail forces the audience to confront the evil Spike has committed in his past (36). After this scene, Spike leaves to fight for his soul, but these actions are, once again, not enacted selflessly. Spike is still motivated by his love for Buffy, but now, he also wants to redeem himself to become what she deserves, and gaining this soul will elevate him from thing to man. Spike believes this elevation can occur through his own actions – he fights for his soul – but even with a soul, Spike still exists within the immanent frame and can never achieve transcendence.

Though the show requires Spike to have a soul in order for him to be good, a soul on *Buffy* does not allow for transcendence because a soul is never equivalent to a stable moral understanding; the characters' place significance on the soul, but a soul alone cannot make a person moral. Stevenson recognizes that a soul does not provide one with transcendent standards of morality because a person still must make the right decisions. However, having a soul gives people the option to choose when before, they would not have options (88). For example, a villain that is present in multiple seasons, Warren, is a human being that has a soul, yet he creates a robot girlfriend ("I Was Made to Love You"), kills his ex-girlfriend ("Dead Things"), and murders Willow's girlfriend Tara ("Seeing Red"). A soul does not give someone a absolute access to morality, but it enables them to have a choice. Though Gregory Sakal does not specifically mention a soul, he explains that this "ability to choose" is what separates the monsters from humans and gives people the opportunity for redemption. These characters must fight to prove their worth (251). For a character on *Buffy* to have a moral understanding, he or she must have the ability to choose to do good.

Without this choice, moral culpability and responsibility would not exist; however, the soul lacks inherent significance because the characters are placing their own perceived significance on the soul. Taylor argues that in our current age, people place significance on people, objects, and places without acknowledging their inherent worth. Instead, this significance derives from emotions and personal choices (36). Because the characters, namely Buffy, place such significance on the soul, other characters, and the show follow the set of rules that give significance to something exclusively through recourse to emotions and personal choices. Spike believes that "[he] can't be a man. [He's] nothing" without a soul because the other characters tell him that he is nothing without a soul ("Seeing Red"). This need to acknowledge that

something can provide a person or being with a moral understanding shows that “*Buffy* implies a divine presence and seeks a transcendent Go(o)d at the same time that it denies this existence” (Erickson 117). The characters believe that something outside of their buffered selves is necessary, but they have no resources for such a grounding ultimate standard for morality. They still refuse to recognize that a moral understanding must come from the divine and not from their buffered selves.

Without a divine source, a moral understanding comes from the standards that a person creates within his or her immanent frame; these standards thus become subjective. Stable moral understanding is absent from this world, and because of that, people create guidelines, policies, and expectations to force people to operate within specific, man-made moral codes (Smith 128). In *Buffy*, Buffy acts as the shows highest moral authority; it is by her and her standards, her moral codes, that other characters judge their actions. This is reminiscent of how Spike is treated without a soul. He cannot meet these standards and expectations, so he is treated as an animal. Buffy’s authority gives her the ability to make decisions and place significance wherever she chooses because she is the highest moral authority, but her choices, unfounded in a stable moral understanding, take away from any transcendent significance, as evidenced by the fact that Spike’s soul loses significance after he retrieves it. Taylor argues that “[a]ll options are equally worthy, because they are freely chosen, and it is choice that confers worth. The subjectivist principle underlying soft relativism is at work here. But this implicitly denies the existence of a pre-existing horizon of significance, whereby some things are worthwhile and others less so, and still others not at all, quite anterior to choice” (37-38). By imputing their own significance onto the soul and creating their own standards for morality, the characters of *Buffy* are rejecting the possibility of transcendence even while they are acknowledging that an immanent frame might

not be enough to permit significance and meaning in their lives. Spike best exemplifies this untenable position because he attempts to gain his soul to become something more, but his buffered self blocks him from transcendence and significance, which creates a cycle of yearning towards transcendence and significance but never gaining it within an immanent frame.

When Spike retrieves his soul, it is an attempt to become what Buffy demands that he become, but Spike learns firsthand that significance and transcendence cannot emerge out of the buffered self. Spike works within his buffered self to fight for his soul because he believes that he has the power to make the necessary changes that will force Buffy to acknowledge him as a man. Spike first decides to fight for his soul when another character tells him that “things change,” and Spike says, “If you make them” (“Seeing Red”). Spike’s decision here is a continuation of his pattern to modify his actions to achieve his desires, and in this case, he desires to change himself for Buffy to prove his worth.

Because Buffy has placed such significance on the soul, Spike believes that if he retrieves his soul, all of his problems will be solved. He will gain Buffy’s love. When Spike has his soul, he says to Buffy, “Why does a man do what he mustn’t? For her. To be hers. To be the kind of man who would never. . . to be a kind of man. She shall look on him with forgiveness, and everybody will forgive and love. He will be loved” (“Beneath You”). However, the soul does not automatically win Buffy over; instead, Buffy does not recognize that Spike has a soul until he tells her. The significance that she places on the soul does not prove true in application. If having a soul according to the show automatically provides a person with a moral foundation, Buffy would notice a difference in Spike’s behavior; she would see him as a man instead of an animal, but when she first sees him, she still treats him as if he were lesser being.

Instead, Spike has gone slightly insane, and Buffy only notices that Spike is acting unusual. When Spike tells Buffy that he has a soul, Buffy decides that Spike is now worthy of being a man: “Be easier wouldn’t it? If it were an act, but it’s not. You faced the monster inside of you, and you fought back. You risked everything to be a better man” (“Never Leave Me”). Once Spike has a soul, he can now be a “better” man, when before, Spike could not be a man at all. This arbitrary set of moral standards does not align throughout the show because even though the characters place significance on having a soul, when Spike gets his soul back, Buffy does not recognize the change.

Buffy’s lack of recognition conveys a disbelief in the significance of Spike receiving his soul, and Spike’s buffered self also creates a barrier between himself and outside forces. Smith argues that “Taylor seems to be suggesting that we are recipients of our own self-fulfilling prophecies; deciding beforehand that exclusive humanism sets the conditions for our moral life, we have thereby shut down our openness to transformation” (126-27). A soul cannot make a significant change to Spike’s character because his buffered self blocks him from changing or reaching transcendence. So, Spike’s soul does not grant him forgiveness or purposefulness, and as a result, he turns to Buffy for fullness instead of the divine. As Stevenson notes, “He hangs onto the cross because of the sacrifice. It is the symbol for the forgiveness he seeks, for the grace that has heretofore eluded him. It is the source for the hope that he might not end up in the ‘hell’ he deserves” (226). When Spike regains his soul, he expects to feel different and to feel a sense of purpose, but Spike still feels lost in the world. Spike is closed off from outside forces, which includes his soul, and the soul’s lack of inherent, transcendent significance stops him from truly transforming into the man he expects to be.

Without a soul, Spike's emotions had continued to motivate the character throughout his life regardless of the consequences, but now, Spike has lost his place in the world. He is no longer a soulless demon, but he is also not fully human, and because the soul does not give Spike a moral understanding, Spike has no higher foundation on which to build a healthy moral vision. Spike can now operate in response to the moral codes that exist within *Buffy*, but Smith argues that moral codes are not strong enough for a stable moral understanding because codes do not equate to a moral drive (128). Smith specifically refers to the motivation behind following such codes, and Spike's emotions motivated him while he was soulless and were what pushed him to choose good, but to follow a strict law or set of standards with no universal foundation, Spike lacks sufficient motivation. Moral codes are also inadequate because when extenuating circumstances arise, the moral codes are rigid and do not always translate well in new situations (Smith 128). The significance that *Buffy* places on the soul does not translate well when Spike regains his soul. His actions do not convey that a soul has provided him with anything other than guilt. Also, in Season Seven, Episode Six, Dawn displays the hypocrisy of the characters' belief in the soul: "But to get a soul? Like that would make him a better man? Xander had a soul when he stood Anya up at the altar" ("Him"). Since the characters claim throughout the show that a being must have a soul to be good, Spike should exercise morally good behavior, but Spike is mostly confused about his place in the world now.

Spike's journey towards becoming ensouled demonstrates the fragmentation that necessarily occurs when one works within a buffered self. Sharon M. Kaye and Melissa M. Milavec say that "Spike, motivated by his erotic love for Buffy, has cultivated a soul, suggesting a materialist rather than metaphysical conception of human ethics: his goodness is built, not given" (179). Spike does not use the divine to restore his soul; instead, he uses strength and

willpower. Because Spike is able to restore his soul through his own machinations, Cox argues that “Spike’s story therefore illuminates two possibilities: that morality requires only what is already within us and that redemption is something we can bring about ourselves—perhaps there need be nothing supernatural about it” (36). However, another option exists: morality requires much more than what exists within the buffered self, but because Spike possesses a buffered self, he cannot gain transcendence. Smith says that “[i]t’s not enough to simply count on ‘human nature.’ It seems we need a stronger ethic, a former identification with the common good, more solidarity, if we are really to enter the promised land of a self-sustaining ethical code, or even meet the basic condition of the modern moral order” (Smith 125). To gain a true, stable sense of morality that is founded in a universal, divine code, one cannot exist within a buffered self. The buffered self only cultivates a set of standards that one creates through his or her identity, much like Buffy creates her moral understanding through her role as a Slayer, and these standards are not consistent because they have no solid foundation on which to stand, which causes these characters to have an incomplete moral understanding.

These insufficient foundations force *Buffy* to be fragmented its ideologies in regards to morality and transcendence are contradictory. Erickson explains that “*Buffy* creates a world of absence/presence, immorality/morality, sacred/secular, where the experience is always on the edge or in the gaps of perception. It is an ironic world just this side of literal belief in demons but one that is also closed to the spiritual experience—praised by medieval Christian mystics and contemporary theologians—of gazing on a space where God is not” (118). This experience of fragmentation denies the “stability” of the buffered self, showing that the buffered self, and in effect, morality, is not solid. The buffered self pushes the divine away, and through Spike, *Buffy* inadvertently displays the need for transcendence in this secular age:

We create, in our monsters, in our gods, and in our theories, reflections of who we are. As Max Weber says, ‘Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun’ (qtd. in Geertz 5). Yet, like vampires, we cannot always see ourselves in the mirror. . . . And although it is perhaps our historical insistence on a monotheistic theology that has created the need to be one autonomous individual, in looking at American religion we see that there are many Gods and many Christs, just as each of us is endlessly fragmented. If one of the purposes of monsters has been to help define who we are, a show like *Buffy*, where the categories and boundaries are constantly blurred, can help us further understand the confusing and complicated stories we continue to tell ourselves. (Erickson 118)

In this passage, Erickson shows that the holes *Buffy* creates with its fragmented ideology enable the viewers to gain an understanding in their own lives. Taking this farther, these holes display the necessity of God in a culture and also the depravity of a culture that shuns God. Spike’s character illustrates that without God, significance cannot be obtained and morality and identity is fragmented.

### Chapter Four - Which Will: A Longing for Enchantment

*“When you brought me here, I thought it was to kill me or to lock me in some mystical dungeon for all eternity, or with the torture. Instead, you go all Dumbledore on me. I’m learning about magic. All about energy and Gaia and root systems. . . I wanna be Willow”*

-Willow (“Lessons”)

Taylor’s concept of the buffered self challenges the individualistic society that dominates this secular age. Buffy, Faith, and Spike, each act within his or her buffered self and establish a moral understanding based on his or her identity and personal choices or whims. Buffy and Faith base their moral understanding on their role as Slayers while Spike’s moral understanding is established in response to other characters. Each character operates within a buffered self, but each character experiences the effects of his or her buffered self differently. Smith says, “Far from being a monolithic space or ‘experience,’ our secular age is marked by tensions and fractures” (60-61). These characters each live within the secular age differently, and each character experiences the unique effects of the buffered self in modernity through their experiences. The secular age allows the option of belief or unbelief, but most often is the option for both. In *Buffy*, Willow’s buffered self allows her to exist within this middle ground.

Willow is another character that operates from within her buffered self, but in Willow, Taylor’s concept of cross-pressurization is apparent because of Willow’s relationship with magic. Willow feels a pull towards magic, towards enchantment, but she operates within a disenchanted world. Smith explains cross-pressure, this middle way, that resembles Willow’s character in *Buffy*: “what should interest us are these fugitive expressions of doubt and longing, faith and questioning. These lived expressions of ‘cross-pressure’ are at the heart of the secular” (14). Willow illustrates cross-pressure in a buffered self because, throughout the show, Willow

expresses her need to be more than what she is, so she turns to mystical forces that provide her with an unstable source of power; however, her thirst for knowledge leads to her forces that she cannot control within this secular age. Willow's reliance on other forces or paths in life allows "regular glimpses of what Taylor calls the 'nova effect' — new modes of being that try to forge a way through, even out of, the cross-pressured situation where immanence seems ready to implode upon itself" (Smith 14-15). The buffered self protects a person from outside forces, but when Willow believes that her identity, her skills, her power, and her place within Buffy's world is not enough, she seeks out other forces to equip her with more power. Willow's search for power leads her to search for enchantment through magic in a disenchanted world.

Willow's buffered self is unique compared to the other characters because Willow can sense that she needs something more to gain transcendence; the cross-pressurization of "doubt and longing, faith and questioning (Smith 14). Yet, she still operates within an immanent frame because she minimizes the significance of power from external sources by trying to control outside forces. Thus, Willow's relationship with magic is problematic in this secular age because Taylor argues that this world has moved from enchantment to disenchantment:

Let's look again at the enchanted world, the world of spirits, demons, moral forces which our predecessors acknowledged. The process of disenchantment is the disappearance of this world, and the substitution of what we live today: a world in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, and spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans. . . and minds are bounded, so that these thoughts, feelings, and so forth are situated 'within' them. What am I gesturing at with the expression 'thoughts et cetera'? I mean, of course, the perceptions we have as well as the beliefs or propositions

which we hold or entertain about the world and ourselves. But I also mean our responses, the significance, importance, meaning, we find in things. (288)

Willow, by using and connecting with magic, is attempting to combine the enchanted world of old with the individualistic secular age. Willow bases her identity on magic and outside forces, but she uses her intelligence and willpower to control these forces; she merges the experiences of enchantment and immanence because in order for her to try to reach transcendence, she believes she must do so through her own power; the power that she gains from external forces she then claims as her own.

However, this merging of two separate frameworks causes Willow's identity and moral understanding to be insecure because enchanted forces cannot exist within an immanent frame. Because Willow's self is buffered, she continuously uses magic to find meaning without recourse to transcendence, but these external forces are too big for Willow's buffered self, which causes Willow's identity and moral understanding to fragment. The forces begin to weigh on Willow until she eventually becomes addicted to power; her control over magic turns into magic's control over her. Taylor argues that people may base their individuality on nationality or religion in lieu of transcendent considerations, which establishes their moral understanding should their foundation crumble in some way, their moral understanding will also inevitably crumble (27). Willow predicates her moral understanding on certain tools that enable her to be useful, but she places her identity in external forces, which causes her moral understanding to crumble when these tools prove to be too much for her to handle.

Willow fits within Taylor's concept of the buffered self because not only does she use her own abilities to try to achieve significance and meaning within her life, she also tries to control other forces because she believes her will is enough. Yet, Taylor says, "[O]ur actions, goals,

achievements, and the like, have a lack of weight, gravity, thickness, substance. There is a deeper resonance which they lack, which we feel should be there” (qtd. In Smith 67). Willow’s character illustrates this lack of “substance” through her actions and decisions because, in the beginning of the show, Willow instantly feels the need to help Buffy save the world from evil forces. In Season One, Episode Two, Willow says, “Buffy, I’m not anxious to go into a dark place full of monsters, but I do want to help. I need to” (“The Harvest”). Willow feels drawn to assist Buffy because doing so will provide significance in her life, which previously, she did not believe she had.

Willow’s life before Buffy is a washed-out version of the life Willow will eventually lead because Willow recognizes that her life is missing purpose. Before meeting Buffy, Willow was the school nerd that a classmate, Cordelia, bullied. Cordelia influences Willow’s perception of self by telling Willow that her life is insignificant: “Excuse me? Who gave you permission to exist?” (“The Harvest”). Because of the constant torment and the lack of meaning she experienced in her own life, Willow accepts that she is insignificant in comparison to other people. When Buffy first approaches Willow, Willow says, “Why? I mean, hi! Did you want me to move?” (“Welcome to The Hellmouth”). However, when Willow enters Buffy’s world that is full of demons and dark forces, Willow finds her purpose, and she realizes that her life can hold meaning and significance. However, this change to Willow’s character develops in her a desire for more fullness because of the cross-pressurization, which initiates her longing for power. Willow begins helping Buffy in small roles at first by using her tech skills to find information online. Through this new-found purpose, Willow has gained a voice for herself. In Season Two, Willow tells Buffy, “You can learn this real easily, but if you’re just gonna give up, then don’t waste my time” (“Becoming, Part 1”). Willow, when given a purpose, quickly finds her voice

and is willing to stand up for herself whereas before, Willow allowed others to label her as insignificant.

This newfound drive for more significance and meaning appears as Willow's thirst for knowledge and power. Willow can sense that there is more to this world and to her identity and abilities, and she searches for it first through her own human abilities and then through external forces. Smith explains that while the buffered self protects people from outside forces, it also blocks these people from obtaining true significance: "Sealed off from enchantment, the modern buffered self is also sealed off from significance, left to ruminate in a stew of its own ennui. . . . Our insulation breeds a sense of cosmic isolation. We might have underestimated the ability of disenchantment to sustain significance" (64). Willow experiences the cross-pressure of the buffered self because she has a thirst for knowledge and power that she attempts to gain through other forces that are beyond her control. Willow says in Season Two, "Well, I've been going through [Jenny Calendar's] files, and researching the black arts for fun, or educational fun, and I may be able to work this" ("Becoming, Part 1"). When Willow is introduced to magic, she finds the next step, she believes, of obtaining true significance through magic. Willow's longing for fullness causes to experiment with forces beyond her control.

Willow begins her descent into the dark arts as an educational experience, which aligns with her privileging of the buffered self because she uses her own abilities to learn about these external forces. Willow's thirst for knowledge reaffirms Smith's explanation of "[t]he new epistemic expectation that comes with enclosure in immanence — namely, that whatever is within the sphere of immanence should be understandable to us —[which] means we expect an answer to such matters. Inscrutability is no longer an option" (65-66). Willow establishes herself early on in the show as someone who strives to learn and understand everything around her.

When she is introduced to magic, she begins to study it and attempt to learn more about it, and eventually, she begins to practice magic.

Magic acts as a tool that Willow can use to enact her will; she uses magic within her immanent frame, but she also elevates herself in her mind because she believes she has control and the right to alter reality. Willow was able to find purpose through helping Buffy, and now, she is able to find even more purpose and meaning by creating it through magic. In Season Four, Episode Nine, Willow casts a spell that allows her every whim to come true (“Something Blue”). This spell causes panic and destruction because Willow is attempting to control forces that are not meant to be controlled. According to Stevenson, “Worldview determines action. We act on the basis of our knowledge. How people conceive of their world and of the nature of humanity affects the moral choices they make or whether they believe they have any choice at all” (61). Willow’s identity becomes so engrained with her use of magic and her thirst for knowledge that her moral understanding becomes contingent on what she can do with her powers. Because she can cast a spell or change reality, Willow’s moral understanding allows her to believe that altering the world is not wrong. Tara references Willow’s abuse of power by calling her out for using too much magic: “You know how powerful magic is, how dangerous. You could hurt someone, you could hurt yourself. . . Maybe that’s how it started, but you’re helping yourself now, fixing things to your liking, including me” (“Tabula Rasa”). Willow begins to abuse her powers, changing reality however she sees fit. She even changes the person that she claims to love most. Willow’s moral understanding is based on her abilities, her identity as one who can manipulate magical forces, and because her abilities rely on otherworldly magic and not a divine moral code, Willow’s moral understanding is not stable.

Willow's moral understanding or moral code founded in her abilities begins to disintegrate early in the show because her thirst for knowledge adversely affects her choices. Reiss explains that "even toward the beginning of the series, there are hints that [Willow's] sometimes more interested in acquiring knowledge and power, and avoiding emotional pain, than she is in doing the right thing" (103). In Season Two, Episode Eleven, after destroying a humanoid robot, Buffy and Willow's dialogue suggests that Willow's thirst for knowledge outweighs her moral choices, especially since Buffy is the highest moral authority. Willow, overlooking the robot's homicidal tendencies says, "The sad part is the real Ted must've been a genius. There were design features in that robot that pre-date," and when Buffy asks her if she kept any parts, Willow says that she only kept small ones because "I just wanna learn stuff" ("Ted"). At this time, Willow is learning and fighting alongside Buffy, but these small decisions to augment her knowledge and power only increase the future fragmentation of her identity and moral understanding.

Willow's decision in that moment with the robot pieces foreshadows Willow's descent into the dark arts because of her voracious need for knowledge. Smith explains that Taylor's concept of the super nova "indicates an explosion of options for finding (or creating) 'significance.' We find ourselves caught between myriad options for pursuing meaning, significance, and fullness" (62). Willow uses her knowledge, and then her abilities and power, to attempt to create significance for her life. The false significance that she creates, however, results in a weak and unstable moral understanding because, though Willow's buffered self wishes to create significance, she cannot create or find true significance without transcendence.

Willow attempts to tap into this transcendence by changing herself to become more useful and more powerful, but these changes come from within her buffered self, which provides

only a weak recreation of who Willow wishes to be. According to Stevenson, “Willow’s descent into darkness resulted from a desire to be someone other than the mousy, nerdy Willow. Insecure about her own self-worth and weakness, she sought validation in magic” (24). Willow attempts to use these outside forces to change herself, but her buffered self is created exclusively by her own mind, and outside forces only cause Willow to become unhinged later in the show. She attempts to control enchanted forces, but Willow is firmly in a disenchanting world. Reiss claims, “In contrast to the usual demon, humans are in a constant state of flux. *Buffy*’s writers have always placed a premium on having their characters go through real changes, however painful” (19). Willow’s character continues to make changes as she practices magic and goes deeper and deeper into the dark arts. Willow’s use of magic causes her to change drastically throughout the show, and these changes are not necessarily good because they are self-centered versus other-centered.

Willow frequently uses magic to the detriment of others, and her decisions and actions continue to revolve around her abilities. In Season Six, Willow makes the biggest change by becoming Dark Willow (“Seeing Red”). Willow’s change here consumes her because it is emotionally driven. Willow’s control over the external forces is based on her emotional control. Dial-Driver also lists the times that Willow allows her emotions to overcome her control because Willow allows her abilities to protect her from the outside world (10-11), much like Willow’s buffered self is meant to protect her from outside forces. Willow begins to practice magic because it allows her to be different, but she also begins using magic to protect herself from things that happen outside of her control. Willow continuously draws on magic more and more throughout the show until her descent and lack of control forces her to become Dark Willow. Stevenson explains the corruption of power that causes Willow to lose all sense of herself: “[her

insecurity] explains Willow's attraction to magic and the ferocity with which she pursues it. Magic gives her power, makes her special. This power ultimately corrupts her because it is selfishly focused. Although Willow often expresses a desire to use magic to help people, she primarily craves it as a means of helping herself' (238). Willow's foray into magic does not emerge out of morally good decisions; instead, magic is a tool for Willow to use, and she uses this tool to establish her moral understanding, but without the divine, magic fragments her moral understanding.

By using external forces to establish her moral understanding, Willow's identity and buffered self is different from those of other characters. Willow provides a much different perception of the buffered self and its role in a disenchanted, secular age than the other characters because Willow acknowledges there is more to her world. Taylor describes the experience a particular type of buffered self can have within this secular age, and this buffered self aligns with Willow's character and her predilection towards magic and outside forces:

The decline of the world-view underlying magic was the obverse of the rise of the new sense of freedom and self-possession. From the viewpoint of this new sense of self, the world of magic seems to entail a thralldom, an imprisoning of the self in uncanny external forces, even a ravishing or loss of self. It threatens a possession which is the very opposite of self-possession. For our contemporaries who are very secure in the modern identity or even feel imprisoned within it, playing with the occult can provide a pleasant frisson for the contented, or perhaps even seem to offer a way of escape for those who feel oppressed by disenchantment. (192)

Though Willow acknowledges magic in the disenchanted world, magic consumes her because she lacks the control necessary to use outside forces in immanence. Willow feels purposeless in

the world before magic and demonic forces, but when she enters this world, she finds purpose because it suggests significance where Willow previously believed there was none. However, without recourse to the divine, Willow cannot achieve fullness.

Willow's past feeling of failure enables her to recognize the significance and purpose that is missing from her life, but her buffered self still resists transcendence. Willow can sense there is more in her world. Smith explains that "there is an enduring 'sense of our deep nature, of a current running through all things, which also resonates in us; the experience of being opened up to something deeper and fuller by contact with Nature; the sense of an intra-cosmic mystery'" (73). Though Willow can sense that there is more in the world, instead of opening up to outside forces, she tries to control them. Willow experiences this disenchanted world through her buffered self differently from other characters because, while the other characters keep away from external forces in order to protect themselves, Willow uses the external forces for protection.

Willow still resides within an immanent frame, which conveys her insistence on control, but she tries to merge her immanent frame with external forces so that she can use these forces to do her will. One author argues that "her witchcraft is practical and not linked to environmental issues or spiritual matters. This keeps magic neatly in the realm of fantasy rather than as an alternative religion. Underscoring the practical nature of her magic, Willow's spells rarely involve the supplication of deities" (Krzywinska 188). Willow uses magic as a tool that is meant to be wielded, which allows her to believe that she is in control of creating the significance and meaning in her life; she can create false significance by using external forces. Smith equates this need to create meaning with the nova effect: "The dissatisfaction and emptiness can propel a return to transcendence. But often — and perhaps more often than not now? — the "cure" to this

nagging pressure of absence is sought within immanence, and it is this quest that generates the nova effect, looking for love/meaning/significance/quasi “transcendence” within the immanent order” (69). Willow’s buffered self is searching for transcendence; she is consistently looking at forces outside of her control for meaning. However, because Willow is looking for meaning within her immanent frame, and within her control, any meaning derived from her powers is false meaning and significance.

The false meaning and significance that Willow creates is conveyed through her addiction to magic and its properties. Reiss says, “She hasn’t really learned not to abuse magic, however. When the going gets tough, Willow begins to turn to magic immediately, rather than as a last resort, and starts using it more frequently to mold the world to her own wishes” (104). Willow’s attempt to use magic to create meaning forces her to use more and more magic because it is not creating true meaning and significance; instead, it is only a simulation of the significance that she so craves. Taylor claims that when nature is used as a tool, the inherent meaning is disrupted, which causes the user to become separate from a community (500-01). Willow disrupts the meaning that is inherent in transcendent forces because she attempts to use them as a tool, which causes her to cut herself off from her friends. In Season Six, Willow uses her powers to control life and death by bringing Buffy back from the dead and pulling her out of a heaven dimension (“Bargaining, Part 1” “Once More, With Feeling”). Willow is controlling forces that were never meant to be controlled by a human being, and as a result, she brings Buffy back to a world against her will and causes Buffy and her other friends unnecessary grief. However, Willow continues down her selfish path because instead of releasing forces and trying to redeem herself naturally, without magic, she wants to use magic to erase her problems (“Tabula Rasa”). Stevenson describes Willow’s problem with magic: “Magic is such an addictive lure to Willow

because it transforms her from shy, unremarkable Willow into the person she wishes she was; confident, capable, and someone to be reckoned with. But like any drug, the effect is temporary. Despite her newfound power, Willow is unable to suppress her insecurity” (Stevenson 239). Willow cannot turn to magic to fix her problems, which is a lesson she learns time and time again; however, Willow has learned to rely on magic as the source of her power and her identity that it soon becomes inherent to her being. Willow can no longer exist without using magic.

Willow’s unstable moral code can be seen in her behavior over the course of the series; her attitude and actions deteriorate as she consistently chooses magic over people. Reiss recognizes the change in Willow from early on in the show to Season Six when Willow becomes Dark Willow: “In her struggles with anger, Willow goes from being a girl who suggests to Buffy that ‘it’s a good idea to count to ten when you’re angry’ (‘Phases,’ 2.15) to a young woman who is capable of flying into a fury and destroying the world” (39). Willow’s actions change over time; Willow becomes much more emotionally driven and impulsive. In the beginning of the show, she approached her choices with logic and reason, but later, Willow chooses the faster option. When Willow uses magic to resurrect Buffy, Willow is using magic to fix the grief that she feels over Buffy’s death and to prove that she has the power to control death. Stevenson explains that Willow’s motivations suggest Willow’s eventual turn towards the dark side: “After Willow returns Buffy from the dead, she is full of arrogant pride at what she accomplished and claims to have done what no one else could. . . her pride created self-deception, for the truth was that her actions were an important step towards her eventually becoming a ‘bad guy’” (75). Willow’s actions depict her growing problem with control because external forces were never meant to be contained within an immanent frame, which is what Willow is trying to do.

For Willow, a moral understanding comes from her powers because these powers have become her identity. For other characters, a moral understanding comes from their given identity, like Buffy and Faith as Slayers, but Willow places her identity in external forces, which then have the ability to fashion her moral code for her. Stevenson claims that “[t]he problem for Willow is that along with her growing self-confidence and power comes a degradation of her moral code” (241). The more Willow identifies with her power, the more fragmented her moral understanding becomes. Fragmentation becomes an integral part of Willow’s identity and morality because as her identity is fragmented by outside forces, her moral code or moral understanding follows suit. One author explains this fragmentation as a loss of connection: “Willow seems to be so infatuated with her dominion of magic that she is unaware that her power has a dark side, unaware that all power needs to be connected, unaware that power corrupts, unaware that she deceived the Scooby Gang, unaware that Buffy is in pain, unaware that she has made a very poor moral choice” (Morris 90). Willow’s thirst for knowledge and power ultimately leaves her ignorant of what true significance is, and her use of magic causes fragmentation in her life through addiction and violence.

Willow’s need for power and a continuous source of knowledge constitutes her ultimate downfall; her moral understanding crumbles under the weight of external forces until magic overwhelms her and controls her. Morris describes the moment Willow is no longer using magic for educational purposes, and instead, is consuming knowledge:

Willow’s isolation becomes evident when the former sharer-of-knowledge Willow enters the magic Shop and instead of using the . . . speeding-reading techniques that she used to learn the magic needed to bring Buffy back from heaven, she uses magic to march the printed words up her arms and into her body—she, the teacher, steals the knowledge and

leaves the books black; a shockingly selfish choice. . . Willow [breaks] the first and most important tenet of *Buffy*'s moral code; she has taken a human life. It is evident from Willow's own words that she has severed all ties to herself and to the group. She tells Giles, "Willow doesn't live here anymore." (91)

Willow, controlled by magic, no longer possesses a moral code. She murders Warren and attempts to destroy the world in order to erase the pain of Tara's death. However, because of this consuming power, Willow becomes infused with magic. In Season Seven, Giles says, "This isn't a hobby or an addiction. It's inside you now, this magic. You're responsible for it" ("Lessons"). Throughout the show, Willow searches for knowledge and power through magic and creates an identity in response to that power, hoping to find or create meaning in her life. Now, she is granted a power that is uniquely hers. She is connected to this magic, and her identity is dependent on its power, and she must learn to control it. One author describes the strength of her power: "Because of her deep-seated fear that her closest friends won't forgive her, she secretly wishes to become invisible to them, and her power is substantial enough that this unvoiced desire becomes a reality" (Reiss 89). Willow's power is so fully connected with her that without having to cast a spell like in "Something Blue," the magic performs her every whim.

However, with this connection, Willow's identity has shifted because she has successfully merged enchantment into her immanent frame; yet, this enchantment now resides fully in immanence and is still affected by the buffered self because it is false enchantment, or what Taylor would call "reenchantment." Stevenson says that "Willow cannot completely remove magic from her life, but must learn to deal with its constant presence" (183). Willow's power is so great now, that in Season Seven, Willow uses her powers to give potential Slayers the power of real Slayers, and when she uses her powers to help others, Willow experiences a

type of transcendence because she becomes transformed. Her hair glows white, and an aura is present around her while she lights up with joy and ecstasy and her power. For a small moment, Willow almost becomes a divine being. Kennedy says, “You are a goddess” (“Chosen”). However, after this moment, Willow reverts back to her normal, red-headed self. She experiences a transcendental moment, but this experience cannot last for longer than that because her buffered self pulls her back. Smith explains, “Certainly belief is contested and contestable in our secular age. There’s no going back. Even seeking enchantment will always and only be reenchantment after disenchantment” (61). Though Willow seeks transcendence throughout the show, she cannot hold onto transcendence when she does experience it because she has merged immanence with transcendence. The transcendence she is now experiencing exists only within her immanent frame.

Willow’s buffered self feels the “cross-pressure” of Taylor’s secular age because she experienced a glimmer of purposefulness and significance, and this recognition created a drive within Willow to acquire more. However, while Willow encounters transcendence and uses external forces, she still operates within an immanent frame because she attempts to control these powers for her own gain. The buffered self looks to create or find significance without the help of the divine. Willow practices the buffered self because she encounters transcendence, but her buffered self requires her to attempt to use her own abilities to truly reach transcendence. In Season Four, as Willow and Tara are about to perform a spell, Tara ask if she and Willow are ready to call on a goddess, but Willow says, “This is beneath us” (“Goodbye Iowa”). Willow, existing within her immanent frame, believes that she, and her powers, are enough to give her life meaning and purpose, but in truth, these powers are not beneath her; instead, they overwhelm her.

## Conclusion

*“There was this other apocalypse this one time, and, well, I took off. But this time, I don’t. I don’t know. . . . I guess I was kinda new to being around humans before, and now, I’ve seen a lot more, gotten to know people, seen what they’re capable of, and I guess I just realize how amazingly screwed up they all are. I mean, really, really screwed up in a monumental fashion, And they have no purpose that unites them, so they just drift around, blundering through life until they die. Which they know is coming, yet every single one of them is surprised when it happens to them. They’re incapable of thinking about what they want beyond the moment. They kill each other, which is clearly insane, and yet, here’s the thing. When it’s something that really matters, they fight. I mean, they’re lame morons for fighting, but they do. They never. They never quit, and so, I guess I will keep fighting too”*

– Anya (“End of Days”).

By analyzing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with Taylor’s concepts concerning the secular age, we see that *Buffy* is emblematic of the cultural milieu that Taylor describes, and that the characters offer a deeper comprehension of the buffered self and its limits. Taylor’s theories and Smith’s analysis of Taylor offers a greater understanding of the show because of the show’s use of enchanted beings within a disenchanted world and its portrayal of these beings in the secular age as Taylor describes it. Each character in the show possesses a buffered self and inhabits the secular age, but the characters also provide an understanding of the consequences and possibilities of the buffered self. Through analyzing the effects of the buffered self in each character, we distinguish the problems with modernity because the characters and the show reject transcendence. The show suggests that the characters can achieve transcendence and gain meaning and significance through their own works, achievements, and powers, but through

analyzing specific characters, we recognize that the characters need more to gain both a stable moral foundation and potential transcendence.

This thesis has sought to highlight the aspects of the buffered self in individual characters while also emphasizing a flaw or consequence with the existence of the buffered self; each character portrays the dangers of existing without the belief and openness to transcendence. As such, it has aimed to touch on identity, moral culpability and responsibility, and the divine as understood by certain characters. Each character experiences the buffered self differently and suffers different effects, but through the range of characters and effects, this thesis reveals the crucial need for understanding the buffered self and its ramifications in modernity; without transcendence, we cannot have a divine, universal moral standard.

Morality has long been studied in regards to *Buffy*, with many articles and books dedicated to understanding the show's take on morals and divinity, but each of these articles and books analyze and discuss morality and divinity within the show through a modern, and buffered, point of view. While the show portrays characters that are illustrative of the buffered self, this is only so because the buffered self is natural in this secular age, which means in order to achieve an accurate analysis of characters and the show's message, we need to do so through the concepts of the buffered self. This thesis provides this analysis and argues for the existence of the buffered self and displays the problems that will arise with its existence.

The show's overarching message is that good will always triumph over evil, and that victory will occur because the characters have the strength, skill, and will to achieve what they set their minds to; they alone are responsible and have the power, which is considered a strength in *Buffy*. In Season Seven, Anya says, "When it's something that really matters, they fight. I mean, they're lame morons for fighting, but they do. They never. They never quit" ("End of

Days”). These lines are meant to convey a sense of strength and pride in humans’ ability to fight for what they want or for what they believe, but Anya also acknowledges that human life will end, and that humans are very oriented towards their own individual self: “And they have no purpose that unites them, so they just drift around, blundering through life until they die. Which they know is coming, yet every single one of them is surprised when it happens to them. They’re incapable of thinking about what they want beyond the moment” (“End of Days”). The show portrays its characters with strength inherent in each person, but it also inadvertently recognizes that the individualism, the lack of divine aid, is apparent and unwise.

Each character relies on himself or herself to find or create meaning in his or her life, but with each character, we find that his or her existence within the buffered self causes instability. For Buffy, this instability is her moral understanding. Buffy, as Slayer, is the moral authority in the show that characters look to for guidance, but Buffy’s moral codes are established subjectively and through her emotions at any given time. As the show continues from season to season, Buffy’s moral codes decrease in stability until Buffy’s number one rule, no killing of humans, only matters in certain cases. Once Buffy chooses to make decisions regarding another human being’s life, her moral understanding is not even remotely stable. Buffy’s experience with the buffered self proves that we cannot create moral codes that are strong enough to withstand all kinds of pressure throughout life.

The problems with morality that Buffy exhibits highlights the problems that Faith exhibits with exclusive humanism. Buffy, who develops a strong identity as the Slayer, has a weak moral understanding. So Faith, who struggles with her identity, has a fragile moral understanding that eventually breaks because it was established through her own standards and choices. Faith’s reliance on herself, her focus on individual rights, cuts her off from others,

which places her on a dark path. Faith fights, later, to become good again, and the show redeems her character, but even after Faith's redemption, the show portrays her as unsure of herself and emotionally weak. Faith's experience with the buffered self causes her to be isolated and insecure.

Spike also illustrates the undesirable effects of the buffered self because when promised, throughout the show, that with a soul, Spike will become a man, or a good being, he retrieves his soul only for his soul not to provide him with morality or significance like he expected. Spike's predicament illustrates the false significance that the characters create. Buffy places significance on the show's representation of a soul, but when the soul appears, Buffy does not recognize the difference. While Spike does receive a conscience, he still does not have a moral foundation other than Buffy's moral standards, which have been proven to be subjective. The show argues that each character can create significance for him or herself, but when they do, the significance is a weak simulation of what the characters could have. God instills in us a soul that sets us apart from other beings, but when Spike fights for significance in his life in the form of a soul, he receives a weak imitation, which is why he says, "Got myself a soul, whatever that means" ("Get it Done"). Without transcendent, inherent meaning, Spike's soul does not provide Spike with the significance he is searching for as its significance comes from other characters.

Willow's experience with the buffered self is unique from the other characters because while the other characters only need to rely on themselves to create or find significance and meaning, according to the show, Willow uses outside forces to create significance. Willow still rejects transcendence, but she can sense that there is more power and meaning than what she can reach while she is only human. Willow becomes a witch and uses powers to reach transcendence, but, because she, the other characters, and the show are so trapped within their immanent frames,

Willow cannot grasp transcendence; she can but glimpse it. Willow's experience displays the predicament of the present age because while ensconced in immanence and disenchantment, we cannot reach transcendence and enchantment.

The analysis of each character provides awareness of the problems that we face in modernity, whether those be moral codes that we create instead of looking to divinely given, universal standard for morality, or acknowledging that our perceptions of significance and meaning are less meaningful than inherent significance that is divinely given. This reading of *Buffy the Vampire* demonstrates the necessary aspects of the buffered self and displays the obstacles that will arise during a search for meaning in a secular age. According to Taylor, "It's not enough to simply count on 'human nature.' It seems we need a stronger ethic, a firmer identification with the common good, more solidarity, if we are really to enter the promised land of a self-sustaining ethical code, or even meet the basic condition of the modern moral order"<sup>9</sup> (Smith 125). In a Christian construal of the world, we are made in the image of God, and our identity is found in Him. He is our moral compass or should be. *Buffy* raises questions regarding identity and morality that are important to analyze as a Christian scholar because without God, we have no stable sense of self. In fact, "Joss Whedon has said that an interpretation that locates God within the Buffyverse is a potentially valid one. However, the primary focus of *Buffy* is the *human* struggle with evil, not the divine one. As such, the presence and involvement of God remains deliberately ambiguous" (Stevenson 65). This ambiguity tips the balance in favor of unbelief, but how does the unbelief in *Buffy* affect the characters' moral codes? Can one find fulfillment without God? As we see through analysis, no, each character's search for meaning continues throughout the show; true fulfillment is forever lacking from their lives.

---

<sup>9</sup> Modern Moral Order – "A new understanding of morality that focuses on the organization of society for mutual benefit rather than obligation to 'higher' or eternal norms" (Smith 142).

Taylor is offering a Christian analysis of how to navigate morality within a secular age because, without God, new morals are perpetually created to meet the demands of an ever-changing identity; thus, the characters in *Buffy* are consistently having identity crises that affect how they encounter and react to moral questions and experiences. Because we were created in the image of God, as believers, we accept that our motivation comes from our Creator. However, “[t]his raises the question of motivation for exclusive humanism: ‘the motivation which underlies our highest aspirations.’ Taylor is going to describe this as our ‘moral source’” (Smith 125-26). If our motivation or moral source comes from our relationship with God, those that do not believe in God must find a moral source elsewhere, which is damaging to the self because without God, one’s identity and morality become unstable, which can affect every aspect of one’s life.

## Works Cited

- “Angel.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete First Season*, written by David Greenwalt, directed by Scott Brazil, The WB, 1997.
- “Bad Girls.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Third Season*, written by Douglas Petrie, directed by Michael Lange, The WB, 1999.
- “Becoming, Part 1.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Second Season*, written and directed by Joss Whedon, The WB, 1998.
- “Becoming, Part 2.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Second Season*, written and directed by Joss Whedon, The WB, 1998.
- “Beneath You.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Seventh Season*, written by Douglas Petrie, directed by Nick Marck, UPN, 2002.
- “Chosen.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Seventh Season*, written and directed by Joss Whedon, UPN, 2003.
- “Conversations with Dead People.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Seventh Season*, written by Jane Espenson and Drew Goddard, directed by Nick Mark, UPN, 2002.
- Cox, J. Renée. “Got Myself a Soul? The Puzzling Treatment of the Soul in *Buffy*.” *The Truth of Buffy: Essays on Fiction Illuminating Reality*, edited by Emily Dial-Driver, Sally Emmons-Featherston, Jim Ford, and Carolyn Anne Taylor, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008, pp. 24-37.
- “Crush.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fifth Season*, written by David Fury, directed by Dan Attius, The WB, 2001.
- “Dead things.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Sixth Season*, written by Steven S. DeKnight, directed by James A. Contner, UPN, 2002.

- Dial-Driver, Emily. "What's It All About, Buffy? Victor Frankl and *Buffy*." *The Truth of Buffy: Essays on Fiction Illuminating Reality*, edited by Emily Dial-Driver, Sally Emmons-Featherston, Jim Ford, and Carolyn Anne Taylor, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008, pp. 9-23.
- "Doomed." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fourth Season*, written by Marti Noxon, David Fury, and Jane Espenson, directed by James A. Contner, The WB, 2000.
- "Doppelgangeland." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Third Season*, written and directed by Joss Whedon, The WB, 1999.
- "Doublemeat Palace." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Sixth Season*, written by Jane Espenson, directed by Nick Marck, UPN, 2002.
- "Empty Places." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Seventh Season*, written by Drew Z. Greenberg, directed by James A. Contner, UPN, 2003.
- "End of Days." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Seventh Season*, written by Douglas Petrie and Jane Espenson, directed by Marita Grabiak, UPN, 2003.
- Erickson, Gregory. "'Sometimes You Need a Story': American Christianity, Vampires, and *Buffy*." *Fighting the Forces: What's at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, pp. 108-19.
- "Faith, Hope, and Trick." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Third Season*, written by David Greenwalt, directed by James A. Contner, The WB, 1998.
- "Flooded." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Sixth Season*, written by Jane Espenson and Douglas Petrie, directed by Douglas Petrie, UPN, 2001.

“Fool for Love.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fifth Season*, written by Douglas Petrie, directed by Nick Marck, The WB, 2000.

“Get it Done.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Seventh Season*, written and directed by Douglas Petrie, UPN, 2003.

“Gingerbread.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Third Season*, written by Thania St. John and Jane Espenson, directed by James Whitmore Jr., The WB, 1999.

“The Harvest.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete First Season*, written by Joss Whedon, directed by John T. Kretchmer, The WB, 1997.

Helford, Elyce Rae. “‘My Emotions Give Me Power’: The Containment of Girls’ Anger in *Buffy*.” *Fighting the Forces: What’s at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, pp. 18-34.

Herman, Caroline. “*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Dichotomy of Self: A Study in the Shadow Selves of Buffy and Spike.” *Watcher Junior*, vol. 1, no. 1, edited by Lynne Edwards and Katy Stevens, July 2005, pp. 1-7.

“Him.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Seventh Season*, written by Drew Z. Greenberg, directed by Michael Gershman, UPN, 2002.

“I was made to love you.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fifth Season*, written by Jane Espenson, directed by James A. Contner, The WB, 2001.

“Intervention.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fifth Season*, written by Jane Espenson, directed by Michael Gersham, The WB, 2001.

Kryzwinska, Tanya. “Hubble-Bubble, Herbs, and Grimoires: Magic, Manichaeism, and Witchcraft in *Buffy*.” *Fighting the Forces: What’s at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,

edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, pp. 178-94.

“Lessons.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Seventh Season*, written by Joss Whedon, directed by David Solomon, UPN, 2002.

Levine, Elana, and Lisa Parks. “Introduction.” *Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Elana Levine and Lisa Parks, Duke UP, 2007, pp. 1-16.

“Lovers Walk.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Third Season*, written by Dan Vebber, directed by David Semel, The WB, 1998.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., U of Notre Dame P, 2007.

Milavec, Melissa M., and Sharon M. Kaye. “Buffy in the Buff: A Slayer’s Solution to Aristotle’s Love Paradox.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*, edited by James. B. South, Open Court Publishing Company, 2003, pp. 173-84.

Money, Mary Alice. “The Undemonization of Supporting Characters in *Buffy*.” *Fighting the Forces: What’s at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, pp. 98-107.

Morris, Frances E. “Willow’s Electric Arcs: Moral Choices Sparked by Connections.” *The Truth of Buffy: Essays on Fiction Illuminating Reality*, edited by Emily Dial-Driver, Sally Emmons-Featherston, Jim Ford, and Carolyn Anne Taylor, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008, pp. 83-95.

Mukherjea, Ananya. “When You Kiss Me, I Want to Die: Gothic Relationships and Identity on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.” *Slayage*, vol. 7, no. 2, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, Spring 2008, [www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/26288593/mukherjea](http://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/26288593/mukherjea)

\_slayage\_7.2.pdf.

“Never Leave Me.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Seventh Complete Season*, written by Drew Goddard, directed by David Solomon, UPN, 2002.

Olson, Wendy. “Enlightenment Rhetoric in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Ideological Implications of Worldviews in the Buffyverse*.” *Slayage*, vol. 7, no. 2, edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery, Spring 2008, [www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/26288593/olson\\_slayage\\_7.2.pdf](http://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/26288593/olson_slayage_7.2.pdf).

“Once More, With Feeling.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Sixth Season*, written and directed by Joss Whedon, 2001.

“Out of My Mind.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fifth Season*, written by Rebecca Rand Kirshner, directed by David Grossman, The WB, 2000.

Reiss, Jana. *What Would Buffy Do?: The Vampire Slayer as Spiritual Guide*. Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Sakal, Gregory J. “No Big Win: Themes of Sacrifice, Salvation, and Redemption.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy: Fear and Trembling in Sunnydale*, edited by James B. South, Open Court Publishing Company, 2003, pp. 239- 53.

“Schools Hard.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Second Season*, written by Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt, directed by John T. Kretchmer, The WB, 1997.

“Seeing Red.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Sixth Season*, written by Steven S. DeKnight, directed by Michael Gershman, UPN, 2002.

“Selfless.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Seventh Season*, written by Drew Goddard, directed by David Solomon, UPN, 2002.

“Smashed.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Sixth Season*, written by Drew Z. Greenberg, directed by Turi Meyer, UPN, 2001.

Smith, James K. A. *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.

“Something Blue.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fourth Season*, written by Tracey Forbes, directed by Nick Marck, The WB, 1999.

Stevenson, Gregory. *Televised Morality: The Case of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Hamilton Books, 2003.

Symonds, Gwyn. “‘A Little More Soul Than is Written’: James Marster’s Performance of Spike and the Ambiguity of Evil in Sunnydale.” *Slayage*, vol. 4, no. 4, edited by Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery, March 2005, [offline.buffy.de/outlink\\_en.php?module=/webserver/offline/.www.slayage.tv/PDF/symonds2.pdf](http://offline.buffy.de/outlink_en.php?module=/webserver/offline/.www.slayage.tv/PDF/symonds2.pdf).

“Tabula Rasa.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Sixth Season*, written by Rebecca Rand Kirshner, directed by David Grossman, UPN, 2011.

Taylor, Charles. *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*. The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2011.

---. *Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard UP, 1991.

---. *Sources of The Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard UP, 1989.

“Ted.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Second Season*, written by David Greenwalt and Joss Whedon, directed by Bruce Seth Green, The WB, 1997.

“Welcome to the Hellmouth.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete First Season*, written by Joss Whedon, directed by Charles Martin Smith, The WB, 1997.

“Who are You.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fourth Season*, written and directed by Joss Whedon, The WB, 2000.

Wilcox, Rhonda V. “‘Who Died and Made Her the Boss?’ Patterns of Morality in *Buffy*.”

*Fighting the Forces: What’s at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, edited by Rhonda V.

Wilcox and David Lavery, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002, pp. 3-17.

---. *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I. B. Tauris, 2005.