

Kayla Hengami

GLS Conference Buffy Presentation

When I first wrote this paper a year ago, I was given a rather open ended assignment: choose a work we have studied in class and another work (that could be anything of our choosing) and use them as lenses into one another to explore borders. Going into this paper, like many graduate students, I wasn't quite sure where I was going to take it, or more astutely, where it would take me. I had a keen interest in the work *Angels In America*, which we read in class and the plethora of issues it explored. And I knew I wanted to use *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as well, since for me, Buffy has been an important figure in my life since I was about 9 or 10. I grew up with Buffy and knew how sharply it dealt with many sensitive topics through both literal and metaphorical displays in its world. I quickly realized that a number of issues are addressed or touched up on in both *Angels* and *Buffy*, and that is how my paper soon came to be. Among these topics were religion, morality, abandonment, and good and evil.

Seemingly since its conception, religion has been inextricably tied to morality. Religion, often in conjunction with family life, dictates morality, which is set to define what is "right." Herein it may be

presumed that if there is a “right” conduct then there must be a “wrong,” as well as good and evil. However, can religion and/or morality ever be fallible? These set boundaries tend to blur together more often than not, and what we have been led to believe has always been black and white is more of a grey matter. In examining this grey area, we are able to gain insight into ourselves, and the distorted boundaries we live in on a daily basis. Thus, we may reassess the foundation of our day-to-day beliefs, as well as the judgment we pass not only on ourselves, but on those around us, as well. Today, many modern works have protagonists that reside in these grey areas. Through works such as Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America*, and Joss Whedon’s television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; we are able to further explore the graying of moral borders.

Angels in America opened on stage in Los Angeles in 1992, written by Tony Kushner – a gay Jewish man born in New York and raised in Louisiana. Kushner has said that he felt more impacted by being such a minority figure in Louisiana than he probably would have had he grown up in New York (Tisch, 14). *Angels* came about as a response during the height of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, where fear was running rampant and homophobia escalated as a result. And while the

play is regaled for its political awareness, it is most often referred to as a Jewish play for its theological references and conversations.

Interestingly, Kushner doesn't consider himself a theological writer: saying that although he takes spirituality seriously, it is the subject he is the most uncertain of. Kushner continues to debate and question theology and the evolution of the world. He recognizes that there are no absolutes, no one way or the other, which is reflective in his work where the lines of what is thought to be absolute blur and diminish. His view of the world is that it is always unstable and constantly transforming. Kushner's characters in *Angels*, both human and divine are evolving and enduring their own transformations and realizations throughout the play's duration. No one remains still or placid - which for us as an audience is brilliantly exhausting. The evolving nature then, of the play's characters, is reflective of Kushner's own beliefs regarding instability and uncertainty, what is dependable in *Angels in America*, is change and duality.

The television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, made its debut broadcast in 1996. The show's creator, Joss Whedon had designed Buffy to be more than a TV show, he knew he would make her an icon. Whedon felt that he was tired of the horror films where the girl always

dies. He thought it would be more interesting to create the blonde cheerleader who fights back, conquers, and always makes time for a pun or two. Whedon describes the first mission statement of the show being “the joy of female power, having it, using it, sharing it,” (Symonds, 1). The show set the stage for strong females who still struggle with the menial tasks of everyday life while being uniquely powerful. Add to that plenty of witty banter and snarky comments, plus a handful of metaphors and allegories, and that’s *Buffy*. The show is already breeding grounds for subversive characters, and since Whedon claims that Jean-Paul Sartre’s book *Nausea* is the most relevant book he has ever read, it is no surprise that he uses Buffy to explore concepts such as “freedom” and “evil” in the context of shifting moral values.

Unlike *Angels in America*, which has clear religious references and themes, *Buffy* is a little more difficult to read. Creator, Joss Whedon has declared himself an “angry atheist,” (Erickson, 2). However the show may be interpreted multiple ways, which very well may have been his intention all along. Fascinatingly, the show can be interpreted as being both religious and atheistic. The series is triumphant in blurring the lines between clear definitions of good vs. evil and right vs. wrong, and often depicts characters and situations with a duality to them. While our

heroine is constantly striving to stay on the ethical path, that does not mean she will not also rest in a grey area between borders.

Although they have numerous differences, both *Angels in America* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are key works in exploring the ambiguous nature of morality. Both pieces portray subversive characters and situations intended to demonstrate the instability of moral and religious boundaries. Although the experiences of Buffy and Prior are vastly different, they both endure similar parallels in their plights, and learn to take solace in a grey world. By exploring the topics of religious identity, abandonment, and good vs. evil, primarily through the characters of Prior Walter from *Angels* and Buffy Summers from *Buffy*, the moral grounds used as societal norms placed upon us are brought into question, and the answers are no longer black and white.

In my full paper I discuss all three of these aspects, however today I will focus on Good vs. Evil which also ties in theological aspects. In order to get at this grander theme, we should first begin with our main characters: Buffy and Prior.

In the eyes of social norms, Buffy Summers would be the least likely candidate to be viewed as an upstanding moral citizen. After being expelled at the end of her freshman year of high school on suspicions of

arson involving the school gym, not having much contact with her father since he divorced her mother, and said mother who is more preoccupied with her career than her teenage daughter, Buffy stands alone with a sullied reputation. Indeed, Buffy is seemingly rejected at every corner – aside from her family’s dismissal, she is immediately put on a type of “proceed with caution” list with her new principal, and labeled a “freak” by the popular crowd. And yet, society’s reject is selected as the “Chosen One,” to save the world time and time again. Buffy has an immense responsibility thrust upon her, one which she repeatedly tries to reject, yearning for a teenage life filled with as she says, “something normal, something safe,” (Season 1, Episode 3). For Buffy, being the Vampire Slayer only furthers her isolation from the world, and while the opening credits through the first season state, “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,” it is not until the series progresses that Buffy’s strength grows and she accepts her position of the Slayer, and with it her own power.

Another reluctant hero is Prior Walter from *Angels in America*. Prior, too, falls outside social norms – a gay man infected with AIDS - left even by his own lover. Unlike other characters in the play, Prior

does not align himself strongly with a particular religion; the rare moments he openly gives the audience insight into his heritage is when he refers to himself and his family as “WASPS,” (*Millennium Approaches*, Act 1, Scene 4), and then later declares, “My name is Prior Walter, I am...the scion of an ancient line, I am...abandoned,” (*Millennium Approaches*, Act III, Scene 7). When he becomes increasingly ill and is taken to the hospital, he does not pray to God or any heavenly beings; he only asks for his lover, Louis, who is absent in his time of need. Prior’s lack of religious involvement makes his predicament increasingly ironic when an Angel crashes into his hospital room and declares him a Prophet. It is possible that Prior does not lean much against religion because he already has strength of character and does not need borrowed strength. Thus, oddly enough what can be seen as “religion,” represented through the Angels, approaches him and hopes to lean on Prior for strength. What does garner Prior’s reaction is when the Angel describes that God, “The King of the Universe,” has left them, and Prior is thus able to commiserate with the abandonment felt by the Angels in Heaven (*Perestroika*, Act II). It is not the divinity of the Angels that warrants Prior’s attention, but rather the humanity that inspires him to consider the issues they require his assistance with.

Oddly, in *Angels in America*, God who so much faith and belief is put into, who mass society defines themselves by, has no qualms with up and leaving the world and His followers. What, then is the play suggesting about God, religion, and morality? It may be said, based on the play, that a belief in any of these three components is fickle, and as exemplified by Prior and numerous other characters in *Angels in America*, devotion to God, religion, and/or morality does not make one a strong individual, only we, as individuals are able to accomplish strength within ourselves, not through any other vessels or guises. In the play, God is depicted as a fallible being, and Prior is quick to recognize this and play on the humanity of the situation to hold the Divine accountable for His actions:

God...He isn't coming back. And even if He did...If He ever did come back, if He ever dared to show His face,...if after all the terrible days of this terrible century He returned to see...how much suffering His abandonment had created, if all He has to offer is death, you should sue the bastard. That's my only contribution to all this Theology. Sue the bastard for walking out. How dare

He....And if He returns, take Him to Court. He walked out on us. He ought to pay (Perestroika, Act V, Scene 4).

And, thus, while Prior did inadvertently fulfill his duty as Prophet by advising the Angels in how to proceed, his power always came from within himself. This immoral man is the strongest and most profound being in *Angels in America*.

Good vs. Evil

Traditional religion requires that people adhere to a specific morality that distinctly dictates what constitutes righteousness. However, both *Angels in America* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* demonstrate that right and wrong, good and evil are neither as clearly defined nor separate as we may have inferred them to be. Rather, these boundaries tend to blur and a grey area is formed where most beings seem to reside.

In *Angels in America*, God has abandoned Heaven and his peoples, thus putting the Divine - He who is thought to be ultimately right and infallible - in the wrong. And if God is wrong, then wouldn't religion, which follows Him, be so as well? In *Angels*, God even hires Roy Cohn to defend him and give him legal advice, the same Roy Cohn who is

described as “the polestar of human evil... the worst human being who ever lived,” (*Perestroika*, Act IV, Scene 3). Suddenly, God is no longer the ultimate right, nor would He be described as evil, but his mistakes and abandonment would place him in the grey area. If God can be fallible, then so would morality and religion by association.

The “either/or” type of logic often given in terms of religion and morality is unrealistic. Rather, “and” logic actually applies to most if not all situations: “ a being is not evil or good, not human or vampire, but good and evil, human and monster,” (Erickson, 8). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* clearly demonstrates how “and” logic works best: There are no absolutes of good and evil in the world of *Buffy*, although they may be desired, that purity one way or the other does not exist. The characters on *Buffy* are ideal examples of crossovers between good/evil, and beings that reside in the grey area.

Angel is Buffy’s vampire boyfriend and first true love on the series. He is over 240 years old, and a reformed vampire who was given his soul back through a gypsy curse (as one does). Indeed, a curse meant to punish the vampire did so by giving the “demon” back his soul, ironic, no? Angel is the one to give Buffy her cross necklace in the first season for extra protection, and he is the one who helps her fight demons and

creatures with evil intentions. Technically, Angel is a demon, and while he may have darkness in him he also strives and fights for the light. Therefore, Angel is a demon with more goodness in him than not, and if a demon can be good then why wouldn't a human or a divine being (as exemplified in *Angels in America*) have the ability to be bad? Angel's ability to be good while being a creature who is intrinsically thought of as "bad" or "evil" places him in the grey area as well, and helps to further exemplify that "there *is* no pure evil or pure good," (Erickson, 7). Some may attempt to argue that it is because Angel has a soul that he is good, and perhaps his soul's reappearance is what first catalyzed his reformation. But, if it is solely the presence of a soul that makes one good, then how can depravities performed by humans be explained? As academic Virginia Postrel explains in her article, "redemption is possible, the once evil can change," (72).

Following Postrel's notion that "the once evil can change," we can also surmise that the once good could too change for the worse. Case in point, the character of Faith on *Buffy*. Faith is the other slayer that was brought on accidentally when Buffy momentarily dies in season one (don't worry guys she's fine now!). When Faith comes to town, she encourages Buffy to embrace her slayer and enjoy the freedom and

power that comes along with their job. In other words, Faith encourages Buffy to find the perks of being the Slayer rather than just the worldly responsibilities. At first these notions seem innocent enough, perhaps even positive, Buffy is still a teenage girl after all, she should enjoy herself a touch more. The difference is Buffy feels the weight of the world on her shoulders and with it immense responsibility, while Faith focuses more on the power bestowed upon her and what she can achieve with said gift. Buffy does have the ability to take lives, to choose who lives and who dies, it could very well liken her to God or a divine power. However, as Buffy acknowledges in Season 3: “we [do not] get to pass judgment on others like we’re better than everybody else,” (Season 3, Episode 15).

Faith, however, thrives on the power and the violence of being a slayer, and during a fight gets carried away and accidentally kills a bystander. Once the initial shock has worn, Faith justifies her kill by referring to it as a balance – that she does so much good as a slayer that one bad kill doesn’t matter (Rabb, 5). What is learned here is that not only does Faith enjoy her power too much, and believes it makes her above others. She also has no remorse for taking life and enjoys the kill.

What follows is the further demise of Faith's goodness, as she becomes a hired assassin for the town Mayor – a demon (of course).

Unlike Angel, Faith hasn't had her soul restored because she has always had a soul since she is human; plus she is a Slayer, which is supposed to put her on the side of goodness and righteousness, but she chooses evil. Faith is not forced or born into an evil existence; it is a path she chooses, making both Faith (the character) and faith (the concept) fallible entities. Does Faith consciously choosing evil make her an even more despicable creature than other demons who are supposed to be innately evil? Faith's actions and lack of care supersede the notion that a soul is what makes a being "good." No being is purely good or purely evil because that does not exist, every being has light and dark in them and it is their choice as to which path they choose to follow.

Morality tries to define good vs. evil and right vs. wrong in very disparate boundaries. However, what may be surmised from both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angels in America* is that good and evil; right and wrong are not all separate entities, rather they reside together in every being and are often muddled together.

No one would immediately believe that Buffy Summers and Prior Walter are similar or share any commonalities. After all, Prior is a

homosexual man suffering from AIDS, and Buffy is a teenage girl who fights demons and vampires, when she isn't doing her algebra homework. And yet, both characters share parallels: both are social outcasts, reluctant heroes forced to help save the world, and have been abandoned by those they love. Additionally, they both inhabit a world where there is no pure good or evil, no absolute right or wrong, they live in a grey area.

So, why is it that these two works, particularly the characters of Buffy and Willow are so successful? Both of these figures give people hope. They are underdogs, and both are flawed and imperfect. That is why they are successful; their imperfections make them relatable. As we've discussed, neither of them is purely good. Rather, they are flawed and they make mistakes, and more importantly, they see that the world is also neither purely good nor purely evil, and that morality based on such extremes is unreliable.

As both characters experience, religion is fallible, as is family, therefore, morality based on religion and family is unstable and incomplete. These moral extremes do not exist. And those who set to achieve such extremes are basically set up for failure. Rather, the world exists in a moral grey area, and the sooner we are able to follow the

leads of Buffy and Prior and accept that, and build our own happiness and communities based on this grey morality, the better we may be.

Although the worlds of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angels in America* may differ from our own, the boundaries are the same. We exist in a world that is constricted by extreme borders, and yet we live our daily lives blurring said borders. Our own experiences demonstrate that the grey area is where we, too, reside, and that these extreme borders do not actually exist. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angels in America* both help demonstrate the impurity of the moral boundaries of our own lives, and help us to accept not only our own imperfections and impurities, but those of the moral grey zone, as well.