

You're Beneath Me: The Stigma of Vampirism in the *Buffyverse*

Buffy's rejection of Spike, "You're Beneath me" does more than deflate his romantic advances, it reinforces Spike's status as an unworthy. Lack of soul becomes a stigma that relegates the vampire to a subordinate class of being regardless of all other aspects of his or her social identity. Soullessness becomes an identifying characteristic and justification for extermination.

Consider the following questions. Would you support an institution that trains personnel to kill individuals based on differences of race, ethnicity, mental impairment, physical abnormality or other involuntary traits? What if these individuals were generally accepted to be violent and uncontrollable or maybe not as intelligent as everyone else? Can you think of any populations in our own reality that may be perceived this way? How have these populations been treated in the past? How are they treated now? Would you endorse the employment of certain individuals to kill members of these groups on sight without external review?

Every week as we delight in the actions of Buffy and Angel in their fight against evil, we are saying "yes" to the concept of killing another sentient being on the basis of personal attributes they did not choose and can not be rid of. And, on the basis of the threat those negative attributes are perceived to represent.

I am not referring to the Big-Bad story arcs like the Mayor or the Master. They represent larger mythological themes of good and evil. I am referring to the casual, hardly considered, almost recreational slaying of the average vampire. A being so lowly he or she can be hunted while munching a bag of chips, doing homework, or wearing high-heels. Mom can come along and bring snacks. Can't sleep? Kill a couple vampires. It's good for the complexion and a potent aphrodisiac!

I am talking about the stigma of vampirism. A population bearing an attribute that is so shameful it causes the dominant group to view those afflicted as insignificant, unworthy, and potentially dangerous.

The purpose of this presentation is to introduce the concept of vampire, as a stigmatized subordinate population, then explore the personal meaning of that designation to the individual vampire. I will refer to Erving Goffman's excellent theoretical work on "Spoiled Identity" in considering the vampire's self-knowledge, his relationship to the world of humans, and the array of coping strategies vampire kind use to deal with rejection by the dominate group. The goal is not to sympathize with vampires as such, but to analyze our own acceptance of cultural valuation and intolerance through the more comfortable medium of fictional television.

More than Lack of Numbers

Defining a population as subordinate requires more than lack of numbers. To be considered a minority, a population must be treated unequally, exhibit distinctive physical or cultural traits, become members involuntarily, form primary relationships within the sub-group, and be aware of their unequal status. Subordination is a reflection of societal values with respect to sub-groups. Stigma is the mechanism by which those sub-groups are identified and kept powerless. Sociologist Erving Goffman cites three broad categories of stigma: physical deformity, weak character, and tribal. Vampires can roughly fit into all three categories: they bear physical manifestations that set them apart from humans and demons, their dependence on blood and lack of a soul identifies as a weak character, and they belong to a social stratum that functions as tribal in the *Buffyverse*.

The primary culture, in this case humans, employs an array of social weapons to maintain the status quo and deny the subordinate populations access to the bounty of in-group status. One of the more powerful weapons, and the one used most effectively in *Buffy*, is labeling which uses contrived metaphoric imagery to create fear in the masses. Erving Goffman calls this Stigma Theory: "an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences..." in this case: lack of a soul. The labeling creates an alternate reality of us and them that propels members of the primary population to continue the discrimination while maintaining distance and mutual distrust.

Buffy takes labeling to a new level. One of the defining characteristics of *Buffy* is the use of punning and sarcasm. A great deal has been written about the unique linguistics presented in the *Buffyverse*. It is particularly interesting concerning her verbal bashing of those she is about to slay. In considering vampires as a subordinate class the most piercing aspect of Buffy's technique is that of a cutting witticism before dusting. Buffy doesn't just slay the vampires; she demoralizes them through humiliation and ridicule, striking them with their lowly status, and *then* kills them. In *Buffy*, language as an instrument of execution is as sharp as any stake.

Season Six has a central theme of reinforcing the labels of those so stigmatized. In a powerful scene Buffy, full of her own doubts of self-worth seeks to force Spike, her friend, enemy, and lover, into a subordinate role by reiterating the source of his stigma;

“You don't ... have a soul! There is nothing good or clean in you. You are dead inside! You can't feel anything real! (“Dead Things” 6013)

She would repeat this mantra through out the season as she sought to reaffirm her own human value, post post-mortem, by reinforcing Spike's role as an unworthy.

The label “soulless” comes to represent the stigma of vampires. This is significant for at least two reasons: first because throughout both series we have seen human beings that are far more destructive than many vampires and yet they are accorded due process and a legal defense. And second, because it is suggested that a lack of soul prevents the vampire from making conscious choices regarding his behavior, he or she should be accorded more leniency when caught nipping at the jugular, not less. That the vampire is staked and not taken into custody is further evidence of his subordinate status. The morality of the *Buffyverse* is quite clear: with few exceptions, vampires have no value and can be executed at will, humans, even very powerful, evil humans, are given their day in court.

The High Cost of Living Beneath

There is a high cost to living beneath. Vampires are disliked and hunted by the Slayer, certainly, but also by pure demons who are repelled by their hybrid status, and

even other humans such as Charles Gunn's original gang in *Angel*. It is an un-life fraught with peril and stress.

Erving Goffman discusses the tendency of members of stigmatized groups to come together in a variety of venues for support and belonging. *Buffy* and *Angel* demonstrate these groups with establishments like Dave's Bar and Willy's Bar that serve as shadowy "territorial" bases for vampires, drug addicts, demons and other kinds of outcasts. Residential communities such as ghettos or reservations are reflected in the graveyards, sewers, and industrial districts of both shows. The *Buffyverse* even has a motivational speaker turned vampire hawking a pyramid scheme. *Buffy* and *Angel's* vampire sub-group, far from being mindless, violent, predators, demonstrate a need for social companionship and belonging, places where "members can come together under a plain wrapper (Goffman 1963: 22).

Vampires can and do, form relationships, fall in love, get married. They have friendships, usually with those who share the stigma or are sympathetic to it. They live in a micro-culture within the macro-culture. The *Buffyverse* presents us with a full-spectrum of vampire relationships. Spike and Drusilla, represent love and passion and cowboy-vampire Lyle Gorch who is first seen in Sunnydale with his brother, Tector, in season 2 (Bad Eggs) returns in season 3 (Homecoming) with his wife, Candy. Spike forms a close friendship with the demon Clem who, in turn, crypt-sits while Spike is in Africa seeking his soul. And, of course, Caritas offers a high-class karaoke entertainment where demonic sorts of all stripes (sometimes literal stripes) can come together in a non-threatening venue.

The treatment of vampires as a sub-culture goes deeper. Something that struck me as being highly significant in the *Buffyverse* is the portrayal of millenarian movements, religions founded on the belief that a future upheaval will occur expelling the, in this case, human populations and restoring the earth to the indigenous populations of vampires and demons.

This theme is most developed in the story arc of the Master an adherent of the Order of Aurelius ("Never Kill a Boy on the First Date" Buffy 1005) an ancient vampire

sect that predicts the end of days when the old world will be restored. While fighting Buffy in a crypt, the vampire Luke intones;

“And like a plague of boils, the race of man covered the Earth. But on the third day of the newest light would come the Harvest. And the blood of men will flow as wine. The Earth will belong to the old ones. And Hell itself will come to town. Amen” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” Buffy: 1001).

Although the Master’s personal aspirations fall to Buffy’s stake the millenarian movement is not limited to this ancient vampire or his Order. During the second season we are introduced to two other vampire end-of-days prophecies in the form of the Judge, a demon who is called forth to burn the humanity out of the world (“Surprise” Buffy 2013) and the demon Akathla who will suck the world into hell. In definite parallels to real-world religious prophecy Akathla can only be activated by the blood of the worthy, in this case Angelus, and closed in the same manner through Angelus’ death (“Becoming Parts 1 & 2” Buffy 2021/22)

Millenarian movements like these are a coping mechanism, a focus on a brighter future when the vampire will be free to pursue his desires and long life free from the domination of overwhelming human numbers. The spiritual belief in deliverance provides a ray of hope to the oppressed lending a sense of purpose and determination. In the case of vampires, who are dependent on human beings for sustenance, the Revelation may also incorporate the belief in a world where vampires become the oppressors and humans their easy if not willing prey.

That this theme occurred three times in the seven seasons indicates, to me, a deliberate intention on the part of the writers to provide texture to the world of vampires encouraging the audience to consider the entire social and historical situation in which they live. Unfortunately the theme was never completely engaged. The writers danced around the topic adding enticing snippets of vampire history and spirituality but never allowed a complete narrative to evolve. This may be out of fear of stripping Buffy of her moral imperative to slay, or possibly out of concern that the audience would reject the concept of vampires as spiritual beings with self-determination.

Price of Passing: ending up in the Margins

Social groups, employment, and spiritual paths can provide an outlet for the despair and lack of self-esteem inherent in being a member of a stigmatized group. However, Goffman explains, secondary in-group relations do not offer the "...great rewards in being considered normal" (Goffman 1963:74) For this reason the stigmatized individual will often try to "**pass**". The consequences of such a decision can have adverse effects on the passer as she questions her social identity and deals with the insecurity of knowing that she is eminently "discreditable", that normals will somehow discover her deception and she will become not only someone who is different but also someone who is dishonest.

This fear becomes reality for Angel when he is revealed as a vampire during his first kiss with Buffy ("Angel" Buffy 1007). Presented as a secretive young man, looking out for Buffy's safety, Angel becomes a predator with the disclosure of his *perceived* stigma. Buffy and by extension, the audience, immediately question his intentions throughout the first seven episodes. Though he has exhibited no negative attributes, because he is exposed as one of the distrusted "other," he immediately becomes suspect.. The discreditable becomes the discredited.

In the next season, the metaphor becomes real as Angel becomes Angelus and lives up to his reputation as a monster. Even after his soul is reinstated, Angel is never completely trusted by the Scoobies again. Knowledge of his shame, vis-à-vis his actions as Angelus, colors their perception of him as Angel even while they "know" the two are disparate.

Goffman tells us that members of a stigmatized group may attempt to enter the larger society by correcting their failing and that often this quest is secret. Angel lived above ground in a nice apartment where he could brood and be remorseful while surrounded by lovely pieces of art, Spike is set on the path through misadventure but ultimately sees the value in joining the larger group and goes on a quest to regain his soul, Harmony takes a job and occasionally assists an elderly neighbor. All refrain from partaking of human blood, one of the more negative activities performed by vampires.

Unfortunately remedying the failing does not result in full acceptance by the primary culture but rather establishes the individual as someone with a record. On some level they will never gain full acceptance but will always be seen as someone “not quite good enough.” And, should they attempt to return to their “roots” they may well find the door barred by those who viewed their quest as a betrayal.

This is reflected in Darla’s derisive statement to Angel (S1) that despite his human trappings he’d never be one of “them,” and earlier, later...it was a flashback, her disgust at his soul. Poor Spike got it from both sides from Buffy. At the end of season 5 he believed she had paid him the highest compliment when he acknowledged that, although he was a monster, she treated him like a man. In season 6, after paying his deepest respects by taking care of her sister and fighting with her comrades after her death, she spends the season emotionally torturing him with the fact of his soullessness. Buffy even takes it a step further by pointing out that not only is he not a man, he can’t be a vampire. He is nothing.

Caught between his origin as a vampire, and the desired destination of humanity, welcome in neither place, Spike has become marginalized. The situation is most poignant for the vampire as having been bred of humanity, he can see himself dis-possessed of the defiling traits he now bears and yet know he will not regain his full humanity. This frustration can lead to self-hatred and self-derogation: a potent elixir for the brewing of hate and violence.

Spike is the poster-boy for vampire marginality. He has exhibited the full range of motivations and inner turmoil of an individual assaulted with a stigma, dealing with it and thriving, only to be stripped of that modicum of acceptability by the government installed chip, yet barred from return to his former life as a human by the stigma of soullessness. Not a vampire, not a man. He is nothing.

Spike’s case is unique, unlike Angelus; Spike chose to regain his soul in the hopes of not being one who is beneath. That he did it for love and not for the greater good is irrelevant. Having regained his soul he *did* become a force for good and was the crucial element in turning back the apocalypse during the series finale of Buffy. Nonetheless, with his resurrection on *Angel* he is once more burdened with marginality, this time in the

extreme form of non-corporeality. An ultimate form of marginality, not only is he not a vampire or a man, he is helpless and completely unable to act on the world around him.

But, they're really, really bad

This is, I realize, a very superficial treatment of the stigma of vampirism, abbreviated by the twenty minute time-frame we have. I do want to take a few minutes to talk about the seeming paradox of morality and the stake-on-site imperative.

As mentioned previously with regard to the millenarian movements, the creators of the *Buffyverse* have maintained, despite some wobbly continuity in the tales themselves, a rather consistent discussion of the establishment and treatment of stigma in a population. Vampires are created with history and motivation. Their evil is mutable and they can, one-on-one, have purpose and value. Even be friendly with humans. However, the over-all balance of power does not change. Think of Buffy killing the psychologist vampire in season 7. He was helpful and insightful, a former classmate, the only crime committed being that of dropping Spike's name at an unfortunate moment and bearing the stigma of vampirism.

Think of what Holden might have contributed to the whole if an attempt was made to rehabilitate. In general, vampires could be a very potent ally against the larger conflicts if they were cultivated, given tools to accomplish non-violent goals, and, with the reemergence of the gypsy curse, handily wielded by Willow, re-ensouled. As Spike and Angel discovered in A5 "Damage" they were all innocent victims at one time.

So, what does lie behind the business-as-usual act of slaying?

Once again we refer to Goffman:

"It seems generally true that members of a social category may strongly support a standard of judgment that they and others agree does not directly apply to them."

In brief, the creation of "otherness" is the beginning. We are US, and they are THEM, and we are better. Psychologist Myers and Ridl, in their essay "Better than Average," discuss the tendencies of individuals to perceive themselves as superior to others. This

extends to the image groups have of themselves leading to a concept of unquestioning belief in the integrity of the group irrespective of individual questions about morality and ethics of group decisions.

Having determined that the group is superior and the morality unquestionable the progression is to see other groups as inferior. In conflict, groups will believe the stereotype of “enemy” leaders as evil, stupid, weak and generally incapable of conducting any kind of dialogue or negotiation with the In-group (Irving). These preconceptions establish the interpretation of another’s life, and motivations regardless of any evidence to the contrary. Therefore, Angel becomes a threat when his vampire nature is exposed in spite of his helpful behavior previously. Spike is treated badly by the Scoobies regardless of his heroic actions during the final battle with Glory. Heroism and vampirism are mutually exclusive in the groupthink of the Scoobies.

Acceptance of the group’s superior morality is not conscious; it is a by-product of enculturation. Buffy never had any doubt that vampires were “creeps” as she called them and that Giles’ response “yes, that is why one slays them,” was perfectly reasonable even though her own experience should have suggested that there could be scenarios wherein vampires were not creeps at all. The obedient acceptance of moral superiority leads to acts of slaying that continue to disparage the vampires and corrode the conscience of those who slay. Quoting Ridl and Myers:

“Action and attitude feed one another, sometimes to the point of moral numbness”

Vampires, by their own actions justify these stereo-types in what psychologist Mark Snyder terms “behavioral confirmation.” Humans, acting on stereotypes of the vampire, initiate a repercussion of violence, which serves to reinforce the prejudice. Centuries of living in the shadows, feared and reviled, by the humans that know of their existence and largely ignored by the rest of humanity breeds a self-contempt. Which, complemented by the vampires’ general aggressiveness and resentment of human encroachment, leads to a self-fulfilling cycle of vampire on human violence which in turn justifies the creation of institutions like the Watcher’s Council which trains humans, especially demon-amped humans like Buffy, to protect human kind from the vampire. And so it continues.

So What

The purpose of this presentation is not to suggest anyone run out and found a new chapter of Humans for the Ethical Treatment of Vampires, but rather, to point out how audience acceptance of the Slayer's mission reflects on our own real-world acceptance of violence against the other. It is worth thinking about.

It could be that Spike had it right when he said,

“You exterminated his race. What could you possibly say that would make him feel better? It's kill or be killed here. Take your bloody pick.”

That it was Spike, a member of the hated “other,” that made this statement is indicative of the tendency of members of stigmatized groups to subscribe to stereotypes about themselves and accept the negative treatment by the primary culture.

On the other hand, Buffy's personal strength, over time, came from her ability to see “evil” as a relative term and recognize that there can be value in those “living beneath.”

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Reading Copy

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