

The Threat to the Subject in “Once More, With Feeling”

By

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Personal relationships carry great importance to the Scoobies for their very survival in the chaotic world of the Buffyverse. The Scoobies essentially exist in a psychotic realm where they must survive in an unstable, ever-shifting reality. In this realm, they rely primarily on each other for self-verification. In “Once More, With Feeling,” we witness the breaking down of these essential relationships between characters. Love fails to support and sustain identity on every level. We see the failure of the parental relationship, the failure of friendship, and the failure of erotic love in Tara and Willow, Xander and Anya, and Buffy and Spike. Here, for practical purposes, I will focus on the erotic relationships and the conflicting operations of eros and thanatos within them, particularly in terms of identity. Love is essential to the Scoobies, but the love that maintains them also threatens their identities. They deal with this painful paradox throughout the episode. The very thing that gives meaning to their lives can also operate as a destructive force. Freud struggled with this very paradox in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” He could not entirely reconcile eros (the drive towards love and life) and thanatos (the drive towards non-being) in a satisfactory way. These drives, which would seem to take on positions of direct opposition, in fact, often overlap and run concurrently in the psyche. The instincts of eros and thanatos figure prominently in the series as a whole, but play an absolutely central role in “Once More, With Feeling”. Love

can destroy identity, can erase one into a state of non-being as much as an active and conscious drive towards thanatos. We can see this clearly in the musical episode. What the carnivalesque, musical format allows for is a loosening of speech among the characters, which enables their repressed fears and anxieties to surface. Unfortunately, the inter-personal issues that come out are never sufficiently dealt with by those affected by them. Self-destructive or masochistic tendencies and relationships will dominate until they play themselves out, sometimes with tragic consequences. Though Buffy is rescued by Spike, the episode ends with all of the characters' relationships at perhaps their most tenuous. Because they rely on each other for a sense of selfhood, the detachment that they come to feel points to a willful destruction of their own individual identities.

Tara and Willow have, probably, the closest relationship of any two characters at the beginning of the episode. Tara feels that their identities have merged in such a profound way that she locates herself in Willow. After receiving the gaze of some passing boys, Tara tells Willow, "I know exactly what they see in me—you." As she hovers over their bed later, in a bold scene implying oral sex, she sings "you make me complete." But there is great danger in tying your identity up so completely in another. When Tara sings, "I'm under your spell," she expresses her love in metaphor, but also, she expresses her deepest fears that some aspects of their relationship are cheapened by Willow's use of magic, and that she has invested too much of herself in the relationship. "I'm under your spell," takes on its literal meaning when Tara sings it later, after she discovers that Willow has put a memory spell on her, causing her to forget a recent fight the two had. Now Tara sings, "Willow, don't you see,/ there'll be nothing left of me." Her identity has become so dependent on Willow, that it is crushed under the weight of

this betrayal. Tara tells us that she has “been through hell.” For most of her life her family made her falsely believe she was a demon. More recently, she has had her brain sucked dry by Glory. Her identity has troubled her for her whole life; it is only through Willow that she begins to experience a renewed sense of self. Now, she must leave the one she loves, but she is also leaving a part of herself, part of her own identity.

But Willow is the true masochist in the relationship. Her addiction to magic clearly represents a drive towards thanatos. Like any addict, she has put her addiction in front of everything else that gives meaning to her life, including Tara. Ironically, she even uses magic to avoid dealing with Tara confronting her about using magic. Willow puts a great value on her relationship with Tara, yet she cannot stop using magic even if it means losing what may be the most significant relationship of her life. Even after they get back together later on in the season, Willow’s magic problem has not been resolved. After Tara is killed, Willow goes on a magic rampage that threatens to destroy not only Willow herself, but the world as a whole. This happens in part because Willow and Tara never worked through Willow’s issues with magic even as it threatened their relationship.

The other sexual relationship in the series at the time is between the newly engaged couple, Xander and Anya. Interpreting Xander’s character in “Once More, With Feeling” brings about a number of problems. Xander purposely summons the singing and dancing demon, and denies any knowledge of it throughout the episode, even after people die and his friends’ lives are threatened. Xander’s guilt comes out at the end as if a humorous afterthought, when he gives the excuse that he “just wanted to make sure *we’d, we’d* work out—get a happy ending.” The choice of the word “we” in his admission may strike the viewer as strange. Is this “we” all of the Scoobies or just

himself and Anya? Regardless of how we interpret the word, the preference of saying “we’d work out” over more common phrases like “it’d work out” or “things would work out”, shows Xander’s concern with personal relationships over circumstances. He very likely senses the relationship problems arising within the entire group, but his most immediate concern is with his own impending marriage to Anya.

In their musical duet Xander finally has a means to express his reservations about the marriage. One thing that becomes clear is Xander’s obsession with Anya as a sexual object. Xander shows this obsession, “warm in the night when I’m right in her tight – *embrace, tight embrace.*” And later, he tells her that she is the “cutest of the scoobies/ with your lips and red as rubies and your firm yet supple—tight embrace.” Xander uses “tight embrace” as a metaphor for Anya’s sexual part objects. He replaces the more crude (and honest) aspects of his attachment to Anya with the more tender and less overtly sexual “tight embrace.” Though he is obviously attached to Anya as a sexual object, Xander expresses numerous misgivings about every aspect of Anya from physical and personal traits to dietary habits, but he also worries about his own shortcomings. What if, he wonders, “I’m never that successful”? What if “she thinks I’m ordinary”? Xander admits that he is “petrified.”

But Anya struggles with her own identity issues in the upcoming marriage, and even she exposes deep reservations. She laments her new roles as a human and wife-to-be, “My claim to fame was to maim and to mangle...but I’m out of the biz. The name I made I’ll trade for his. The only trouble is...” Of course, she will never tell, but she feels her sense of identity threatened. Like Xander, she has a range of petty complaints about her fiancé. But, even more troubling, she seems to sense Xander’s doubts. “I’ve

read this tale,” she says, “there’s wedding then betrayal. I know that come the day I’ll want to run and hide.” She also returns to her usual anxiety over her relatively newfound mortality, and the aging process that comes with it. Will Xander still love her when she gets “so worn and wrinkly” that she looks “like David Brinkley”?

Through the loosening of speech that their duet brings about, they both admit, “It’s kind of scary.” They sing together, “I lied,/ I said it’s easy,/ I’ve tried to but there’s these fears I can’t quell.” What comes out in their relationship through this song foreshadows the ill-fated wedding (or non-wedding) that takes place a few episodes later. Xander has misgivings from the beginning of the engagement, but he self-destructively goes forward until the very day of the wedding—causing as much pain as possible for all involved. His misgivings, as well as Anya’s, come out through the loosening of speech that song offers them in the episode, but they react by repressing (or re-repressing) their fears instead of dealing with them. The fact that both of them will “never tell” is exactly the problem in their relationship.

Perhaps Xander wanted all of this to come out when he summoned the demon, but in the next scene he and Anya both complain to Giles (having both heard and remembered everything the other has said in song). Xander complains, “It’s a nightmare, it’s a plague, it’s like a nightmare about a plague.” He pleads with Giles to stop it, but he still will not own up to the fact that he brought it all about. Giles is still looking for leads—but Xander will not help. Why does Xander not admit his guilt after the duet with Anya, and even after he hears that someone has combusted because of the demon? One can understand his need to express everything—if, in fact, that was his original intention.

But the fact that he does not own up when lives are destroyed or put in danger, including the lives of his friends, is completely out of character and beyond explanation.

Of course, Buffy herself faces the most serious threat at the hands of the demon because she represents the most literal drive towards non-being. She *was* dead—and found peace in that state. Since her return to the living, she cannot find fulfillment in her identity as vampire slayer or in her friendships; she ends up seeking it in the most unlikely and unwise of places—in a sexual relationship with Spike. The episode opens with Buffy in recognizable slayer mode as she walks through Sunnydale Cemetery—only this time she is singing. In recent episodes, she has returned to the world of the living after knowing the profound otherness of death. From the opening number, we can see Buffy's struggle between eros and thanatos. She ends the song by singing, "I just want to be/ alive." But does she? She insists that she does not want to lose all her drive, but Buffy's struggle is one of competing drives. Throughout the episode, Buffy faces this age old question of "To be or not to be." She has lost her former sense of identity saying, "I always feel/ this strange estrangement." Where once she found her identity in the master signifiers of "brave" and "righteous," she now finds herself "wavering." Her role as slayer has become tedious—"Every single night/ the same arrangement." She performs her task with lackluster—simply "going through the motions." In a later song, as she marches off to face the demon alone, Buffy sings "I want the fire back." As she will "Walk through the fire", fire becomes a condensed metaphor. There is the literal threat of combustion from the demon, but metaphorically the fire is both eros (the passion of living and slaying) and thanatos (the consuming self-destruction that Buffy comes close to embracing). It becomes a perfect metaphor for Buffy's internal struggle.

Buffy not only feels estrangement from herself, but from the friends who she needs to establish and enforce her identity. She cannot talk to any of her friends about her profound experience of death. During the early scene in the bookstore when asked what she sang about in her song, Buffy insists, “I don’t remember.” Fearing that she may hurt her friends, or alienate them, by telling them what she has been through or what they have done to her, Buffy turns her aggression inward—swallowing her pain. Not until the finale of the episode is Buffy able to tell her friends the truth. In her last major song, Buffy comes face to face with her conflicting drives. She begins, “Life’s a show and we all play our parts.” After the profound experience of death, she can only experience life as artificial and her own identity as a façade. She tries to “sing a happy song,” assuring herself that “Every day’s a gift” and similar notions. But the poetry of the song quickly takes her from hope to feelings of abnormality; she works so hard “to be like other girls.” The second verse follows a similar structure. She assures herself of things she “should be dancing for” like “All the joy life sends/ family and friends.” But this joy quickly collapses into death, “knowing that it ends.” By the song’s conclusion, Buffy comes out on the side of thanatos. In her previous state of non-being, “There was no pain/ No fear, no doubt.” She tells her friends the painful news that she has kept from them, “I live in hell/ ‘Cause I was expelled from heaven.” She pleads, “give me something to sing about,” meaning give me something to live for. As she goes into her wild interpretive dance, her expression becomes more primal and more intense. She has given up on language and is driving wildly towards combustion, towards a return to the state of non-being. Oddly enough, it is Spike, and not one of Buffy’s friends, who rescues her from herself and assures her, “you have to go on living.” He becomes the other through which

she finds salvation. The one person who Buffy can talk to about her experience is someone who has experienced death himself, and here they begin their unlikely and ill-fated relationship. Buffy says, “this isn’t real, but I just want to feel.” She does not love him, but needs him to affirm some kind of identity for herself. Eros would seem to be the drive behind this relationship, but the relationship with Spike works as a symbolic condensation for both eros and thanatos in Buffy since she can only affirm life in one who is dead.

We know where this relationship must ultimately lead, as Spike surely must. Spike is the most overtly masochistic character throughout the series. He falls in love with the girl who repeatedly kicks his ass. Spike perceives Buffy as his object of eros. “I died so many years ago,” he sings to her, “and you can make me feel like it isn’t so.” Buffy finds herself drawn to Spike. She gives away her attraction when Spike asks her, “you just come to pump me for information?” And she has a slip of the tongue saying, “what else would I want to pump you for?” Spike has her number. He says, “you’re scared, ashamed of what you feel, and you can’t tell the ones you love—you know they couldn’t deal.” Here he is not only singing about her feelings for him, but her inability to talk with her friends about her despair. He strikes a nerve in her; as the song ends, she runs away, afraid of her feelings and hurt. Spike pleads for her to “let me rest in peace,” but he would prefer she do the opposite; he thrives on her tormenting. Buffy’s hurt because of Spike becomes even more apparent later. When Giles tells Buffy she must go alone to save Dawn, Spike recognizes it is a mistake (Buffy needs her friends). But then she is mad at him for telling her to leave him alone earlier; he leaves in a huff, but still follows her. Spike expresses his ambivalence over Buffy shortly thereafter when he

sings, “I hope she fries, I’m free if that bitch dies” and then quickly changes his tone, “I better help her out.” From its inception, Buffy and Spike’s relationship is based on extreme ambivalence if not sadomasochism. There is little surprise when it comes to an ugly conclusion several episodes later.

The failure of love and the predominance of thanatos emerge as the prevalent themes in one of the more comically absurd episodes in a series known for comic absurdity. “Once More, With Feeling” represents *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* at its best—making us laugh in the face of death, and cry in the face of life. Personal relationships have always played a key role in the scoobies’ physical and mental survival. By the end of the episode, we see these relationships begin to break down. As the demon says, “there’s not a one/ who can say this ended well.” They can only ask, desperately, “Where do we go from here?” Xander and Anya will continue forward towards marriage until the last moment. Tara will leave Willow, who has put her obsession with magic above their relationship. Buffy and Spike have a sexual affair that proves unhealthy, to say the least, for both of them. The honesty that comes out in song fails to prevent the characters from moving forward in their self-destructive behavior. They are all “drawn to the fire.”