

The Slayer as Binary Deconstruction: Post-Freudian Power and Gender Subversion in *Buffy*

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Maggie Walsh, PhD

University of California, Sunnydale
maggie.walsh@slayerfest.org

Riley Finn

University of California, Sunnydale
riley.finn@slayerfest.org

Forrest Gates

University of California, Sunnydale
forrest.gates@slayerfest.org

Graham Miller

University of California, Sunnydale
graham.miller@slayerfest.org

Abstract

This paper examines the construction of the Slayer in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a liminal figure who complicates rather than reinforces traditional moral binaries. Through analysis of key episodes including “Bad Girls” (3x14) and “Fool for Love” (5x07), this study argues that the series reveals significant parallels between Slayers and vampires that challenge conventional categories of good and evil. Rather than serving as humanity’s unambiguous champion, the Slayer emerges as a figure who exists in the spaces between traditional moral frameworks, possessing attributes that align her more closely with vampiric nature than with ordinary human morality. This positioning creates what can be understood as a post-Freudian space where power, rather than virtue, becomes the organizing principle, while simultaneously subverting traditional gender associations with strength and violence. The paper demonstrates how *Buffy* uses the Slayer concept to explore moral complexity rather than to reinforce simple binary oppositions.

Introduction

Buffy the Vampire Slayer presents itself as a narrative structured around the opposition between good and evil, with the titular Slayer serving as humanity’s defender against supernatural threats. However, a closer examination of the series reveals a more complex moral landscape in which the Slayer occupies a liminal position that challenges traditional binary categories. This paper argues that rather than reinforcing the human/vampire opposition that ostensibly structures the series’ moral universe, the Slayer concept reveals profound similarities between these supposedly opposed figures.

The series' vampire mythology positions these creatures as entities that have transcended conventional moral frameworks. They operate according to what Nietzsche would recognize as a form of master morality, rejecting Christian moral constraints and embracing what the series consistently characterizes as their essential nature. The Slayer, positioned as their natural enemy, nevertheless shares crucial characteristics with vampires: both exist outside normal human moral constraints, both are defined by their relationship to violence and death, and both operate according to ethical frameworks that transcend conventional human morality.

Through examination of Faith's character arc and the violent intimacy revealed in "Fool for Love," this paper demonstrates how the series uses the Slayer concept to explore moral complexity rather than to reinforce simple oppositions between good and evil.

Vampires as Post-Moral Entities

The vampires in *Buffy* represent entities that have moved beyond conventional moral frameworks rather than simply embodying evil. They reject what Nietzsche would term slave morality, operating instead according to principles of desire and power that transcend traditional Christian ethical constraints. This positioning becomes clear through characters like Spike, who embraces his vampiric nature not as corruption but as liberation.

In "Fool for Love," Spike's origin story reveals this transformation explicitly. As the human William, he is constrained by Victorian social norms and repeatedly humiliated by his adherence to conventional morality. When Cecily tells him "You're beneath me," she articulates the hierarchical structure of human society that keeps him powerless. His transformation into a vampire represents not a fall from grace but an escape from these constraining social structures.

As Spike tells Buffy: "Getting killed made me feel alive for the very first time. I was through living by society's rules. Decided to make a few of my own." This articulation reveals vampirism in the Buffyverse as fundamentally about the rejection of external moral authority in favor of self-created values. Vampires don't simply indulge in evil; they operate according to entirely different ethical frameworks that prioritize desire, power, and authenticity over conventional moral constraints.

This understanding complicates the series' apparent moral structure. If vampires represent not evil but an alternative moral framework based on the embrace of desire and power, then the Slayer's role as their opponent becomes more complex than simple good versus evil.

The Slayer's Liminal Nature

The Slayer concept fundamentally disrupts traditional associations between gender and power while revealing parallels with vampiric psychology that complicate simple moral categories. Buffy possesses attributes coded as masculine—physical strength, aggression, the capacity for violence—while maintaining her feminine identity. This creates what can be understood as a gender-subverting concept where power transcends traditional binary associations.

More significantly, the Slayer shares with vampires an existence outside normal human moral constraints. The series repeatedly emphasizes this parallel through the concept of the Slayer's "death wish." As Spike observes in "Fool for Love": "Every Slayer has a death wish. Even you." This psychological configuration—the attraction to death and violence—positions Slayers closer to vampires than to ordinary humans in their relationship to mortality and violence.

The series makes this parallel explicit through Spike's analysis of how he defeated previous Slayers. He explains that victory came not through superior fighting technique but through understanding the Slayers' psychological relationship to death: "Death is your art. You make it with your hands, day after day. That final gasp. That look of peace. Part of you is desperate to know: What's it like? Where does it lead you?"

This insight reveals that Slayers, like vampires, exist in a space where conventional human relationships to mortality have been fundamentally altered. Both groups are defined by their intimate relationship with death and violence, operating according to psychological frameworks that transcend normal human experience.

Faith and the Slayer/Killer Continuum

Faith's character arc provides the clearest demonstration of how the Slayer concept complicates rather than reinforces moral binaries. Her philosophy of "want, take, have" articulated in "Bad Girls" represents not corruption but the logical extension of Slayer psychology when freed from external moral constraints.

In "Bad Girls," Faith explicitly articulates this alternative moral framework: "We're Slayers, girlfriend, the Chosen Two. Why should we let him take all the fun out of it?" Her approach to slaying—treating it as empowering rather than burdensome—reveals aspects of Slayer nature that Buffy typically represses. Faith's enjoyment of violence and her sense of being above ordinary human law represent not deviation from Slayer nature but its full expression.

The episode's title sequence of breaking into the sporting goods store crystallizes this alternative morality. Faith's casual attitude toward breaking human law ("Want... take... have") reflects a mindset that parallels vampiric morality in its rejection of external authority. The series presents this not as simple criminality but as the expression of a fundamentally different relationship to power and desire.

Faith's trajectory from Slayer to killer illustrates not corruption but the revelation of possibilities inherent in the Slayer concept itself. Her alliance with the Mayor represents the logical endpoint of Slayer psychology when it embraces rather than resists its own nature. The series presents Faith not as an aberration but as a demonstration of what the Slayer concept contains within itself.

Violent Intimacy and Erotic Violence

"Fool for Love" reveals the profound intimacy between slaying and vampirism through Spike's recounting of his victories over previous Slayers. The episode makes explicit what the series

has long suggested: that the relationship between Slayer and vampire transcends simple opposition to involve complex psychological and erotic dynamics.

Spike's description of his encounters with Slayers emphasizes this violent intimacy. When Buffy asks "You think we're dancing?" he responds: "That's all we've ever done." This metaphor captures the choreographed nature of their encounters, the way violence becomes a form of communication between beings who share a liminal existence outside normal social bonds.

The episode's climactic moment, where Spike nearly kisses Buffy after their demonstration fight, makes explicit the erotic undercurrent that has always existed between them. This scene reveals that the violent encounters between Slayers and vampires contain an element of mutual recognition—they see in each other beings who share their complex relationship to violence and death.

Spike's insight into the Slayer's psychology—"part of you wants it. . . not only to stop the fear and uncertainty, but because you're just a little bit in love with it"—reveals the degree to which Slayers and vampires share psychological territory. Both exist in spaces where violence and desire intertwine, where conventional moral categories become inadequate for understanding their motivations and actions.

The Material Nature of the Soul

The series' treatment of the soul supports the argument that Slayers and vampires occupy similar psychological territory rather than representing fundamental moral opposites. Rather than representing essential difference between good and evil, the soul emerges as what might be termed a material construct—a component that affects behavior without determining fundamental character.

This understanding becomes clear through contrasting examples like Angel and Spike. Angel with his soul represents not goodness but guilt—the superego imposed upon vampiric nature through external force. Spike without a soul but with a chip demonstrates that moral behavior can emerge from sources other than traditional spiritual frameworks. The chip functions as an artificial superego, suggesting that conscience itself can be mechanically rather than spiritually generated.

This materialist understanding of the soul undermines simple human/vampire moral binaries by suggesting that the fundamental differences between these categories are mechanical rather than essential. Vampires lack not goodness but guilt; they operate without the superego that constrains human behavior. Slayers, positioned between these categories, possess the capacity for both vampiric freedom from conventional moral constraints and human conscience, making them uniquely liminal figures.

Moral Complexity Rather Than Binary Deconstruction

While the Slayer concept reveals significant parallels between supposedly opposed moral categories, the series maintains meaningful distinctions between protection and predation,

choice and compulsion. Buffy's consistent moral choices throughout the series demonstrate that these parallels do not collapse into moral equivalence.

The series' exploration of moral complexity becomes clear in Buffy's response to Faith's descent. Rather than embracing Faith's philosophy of "want, take, have," Buffy consistently chooses to maintain connections to human community and conventional moral frameworks. Her horror at Faith's actions in "Bad Girls" demonstrates that while Slayers may share psychological territory with vampires, they retain the capacity for moral choice in ways that vampires typically do not.

Similarly, while Spike's analysis of the Slayer's "death wish" reveals important psychological parallels, Buffy's ability to resist this impulse throughout the series demonstrates that these parallels do not determine behavior. The series suggests that Slayers exist in a space of moral complexity where they must actively choose between different ethical frameworks rather than being determined by their nature.

Gender and Power

The Slayer concept achieves its gender-subverting effects not by eliminating gender categories but by separating traditional associations between femininity and powerlessness. Buffy maintains her feminine identity while possessing attributes traditionally coded as masculine, creating a figure who transcends rather than rejects gender binaries.

This separation of gender from power creates space for exploring different relationships between strength and identity. The Slayer's power derives not from masculine attributes but from her ability to integrate traditionally opposed characteristics—strength and compassion, violence and nurturing, independence and connection to community.

The series uses this gender-subverting concept to explore how power might operate outside traditional patriarchal frameworks. The Slayer's strength comes not from domination but from protection, not from isolation but from connection to community. This creates a model of power that transcends traditional gender associations while maintaining meaningful distinctions between different types of strength.

Conclusion

The Slayer concept in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* functions not as a simple reinforcement of moral binaries but as an exploration of the spaces between traditional categories. Through her liminal positioning between human and vampire, protector and predator, the Slayer reveals the complexity of moral choice in situations where conventional frameworks prove inadequate.

The series' exploration of violent intimacy between Slayers and vampires, exemplified in "Fool for Love," demonstrates that these supposedly opposed figures share fundamental psychological characteristics. Both groups operate according to ethical frameworks that transcend conventional human morality, both are defined by their relationship to violence

and death, and both exist in spaces where traditional moral categories require constant renegotiation.

Faith's arc from Slayer to killer provides crucial evidence for this complexity while also demonstrating that shared psychological territory does not determine moral outcome. Her embrace of power for its own sake represents not corruption but revelation—the disclosure of possibilities inherent in the Slayer concept that must be actively resisted rather than simply avoided.

Rather than deconstructing moral binaries entirely, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reveals the Slayer as a figure who must navigate complex moral terrain where simple oppositions prove inadequate. The series positions moral choice not as the application of predetermined categories but as an ongoing process of decision-making in spaces where traditional frameworks offer insufficient guidance.

The Slayer emerges not as humanity's unambiguous champion but as a figure who must constantly choose between different ethical frameworks while possessing the psychological characteristics that could lead in multiple directions. This positioning creates a sophisticated exploration of moral complexity that transcends simple binary oppositions while maintaining meaningful distinctions between different types of choice and action.