

Between Justice and Love: Buffy Summers as a chosen Vampire Slayer

Sayaka Oki, Doshisha University, Japan

The Asian Conference on Literature, Librarianship & Archival Science 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study discusses how the different virtues of justice and love are thematized in the role of Buffy Summers, the main protagonist in the Saturn Award-winning TV series "Buffy the Vampire Slayer". Prior to the 20th century, vampire served as antagonists, depicted as the embodiment of evil in various media. The modern vampire genre has re-envisioned vampires as sympathetic main characters. On the small screen, the vampire Angel in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer", who becomes Buffy's love interest in the show's early seasons, is not only enigmatic but also benevolent. In this context, this work analyzes the extent to which the moral stages of Buffy correspond to her vacillating between her mission, namely, to fight in the cause of justice, and her love for a vampire. Based on Michael J. Sandel's three philosophies of justice, namely, maximizing happiness, respecting human dignity, and promoting virtue, the analysis revealed that the moral stages of Buffy show the necessity and difficulty of upholding the third idea of justice, or the promotion of virtue, in her mission to save the human lives given that she lacked high social standing.

Keywords: philosophies of justice, virtue, femininity, vampire genre

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Introduction

This study discusses how the different virtues of justice and love are thematized in the role of Buffy Summers, the main protagonist in the Saturn Award-winning TV series “Buffy, the Vampire Slayer.” This series is based on a film released in 1992. The film was developed into a long TV series, expanded to a total of seven seasons, with 144 episodes. The story describes the life of Buffy Summers in a city called Sunnydale, a fictional place where the Hellmouth, an underground den of demons, exists. To destroy the undead demons and the Hellmouth, a high school student with an extraordinary power is chosen as a slayer in a fight for justice.

Buffy Summers goes to a high school in the early seasons of the series and, after graduation, she becomes a college student. On the one hand, she has in her adolescence the difficult mission of saving the people in Sunnydale. In order to achieve peace in the city, she trains regularly to keep her special power. Furthermore, she patrols every night to fight the demons if they happen to cross her path. On the other hand, the story describes her private life, how she spends time in school or college with reliable friends, and her romantic life. Parallel to her life as a slayer, she experiences her own romantic episodes that can be divided into three categories according to her boyfriends: the first with Angel, the second with Riley, and the third with Spike. The first boyfriend, Angel, is a benevolent vampire who has lived for more than 250 years. The relationship between Buffy and Angel is considered a romance at risk.

In this context, this paper analyzes the extent to which Buffy’s moral stages correspond to her vacillating between her mission, that is, to fight for the cause of justice, and her love for a vampire. Justice is to be practiced regardless of economic standing, race, or gender. This study focuses on the young, powerful woman in popular culture, so as to categorize the meaning of justice by analyzing the story. Based on Michael J. Sandel’s three philosophies of justice, namely, maximizing happiness, respecting human dignity, and promoting virtue,¹ analysis revealed that Buffy’s moral stages show the necessity and difficulty of upholding the third idea of justice, that of promoting virtue, in her mission to save human lives.

1. Sunnydale: City of happiness or unhappiness

The protagonist is living to realize a great mission, to protect the people of the city. Hence, she exists as a slayer for maximizing happiness in Sunnydale. If she patrols every night, the citizens do not need to fear attacks.

¹ Sandel, Michael J. (2010). *Justice. What’s the right thing to do?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 105-106: “One approach, that of the utilitarian, says that the way to define justice and to determine the right thing to do is to ask what will maximize welfare, or the collective happiness of society as a whole. A second approach connects justice to freedom. Libertarians offer an example of this approach. They say the just distribution of income and wealth is whatever distribution arises from the free exchange of goods and services in an unfettered market. To regulate the market is unjust, they maintain, because it violates the individual’s freedom of choice. A third approach says that justice means giving people what they morally deserve – allocating goods to reward and promote virtue.”

However, in order to patrol the city, she has to give up her individual private time. She cannot meet friends or go out to a party. Furthermore, she has to cancel her dates. For the sake of the mission, she does not charge any amount of money and nobody donates; therefore, she has to work at a fast food restaurant in the daytime. In this context, there seems to be a problem: if this mission controls her life, even though she accepts it, wants to justify helping people, and perhaps derives happiness from this, her individual rights will be compromised. For maximizing happiness in the city, she has to give up her own happiness.

The most glaring weakness of utilitarianism, many argue, is that it fails to respect individual rights. By caring only about the sum of satisfactions, it can run roughshod over individual people. For the utilitarian, individuals matter, but only in the sense that each person's preferences should be counted along with everyone else's. But this means that the utilitarian logic, if consistently applied, could sanction ways of treating persons that violate what we think of as fundamental norms of decency and respect [...]²

In the context of maximizing happiness, Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walked Away from Omelas" (1973) can be discussed.³ In the city called Omelas, "a city of happiness and civic celebration, a place without kings or slaves, without advertisements or a stock exchange, a place without the atomic bomb,"⁴ live citizens who are satisfied, as there is no danger. Only one aspect of this fictional place is cause for worry: a child, nearly ten years old, sits in a locked room in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes. Everyone knows that the child lives there in a bitter environment; however, nobody can help it, because if the child were brought up into the sunlight, the beauty and delight of Omelas would wither. In this respect, it should be asked if this circumstance is morally acceptable.⁵ If the fundamental human rights of the innocent child are not secured, one cannot insist that the happiness of the city is perfect. Moreover, all the people in the city know that they live at the expense of the child. The happiness of the citizens cannot be maximized in this situation because of a sense of guilt. Therefore, as the title of the story suggests, one after another the citizens leave the city in the end.

Comparing the Omelas narrative with that of Sunnydale reveals several differences between the two cities as well as fundamental similarities. Sunnydale, like Omelas, is a fictional city where many young students live and enjoy their lives. The story is set mostly against a high school and college background. Nobody asks if they want to move to other cities because there is an underground Hellmouth. Therefore, the happiness of the city is guaranteed by the existence of the slayer. Differences between them include the following. First, Buffy is not physically tortured and is assured of a good living standard, unlike the child in Omelas. She can live with her family and friends in the same home in the daylight. Second, unlike the innocent child who is pitied in Omelas, Buffy's actions are respected by the citizens of Sunnydale. What should be pointed out is that both of them are deprived of their individual rights since the child sits in a locked cellar and Buffy is restricted to her mission. Of course, she

² Ibid., p. 37.

³ Ibid., p. 40-41.

⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

feels delight in saving human lives, but has little opportunity to fulfill her own aspirations.

At this point, an example can be analyzed from the TV series, specifically from Season 6. Buffy died once in a hard battle against the demon named Glory for the sake of sparing her sister Dawn's life. As the Hellmouth was opened, because her sister's blood was dripping on the ground, the sister wanted to die to stop the tragedy. However, instead of her, Buffy chose to die by jumping into the Hellmouth. After six months, her friends, especially her best friend, Willow, decided to use her magic to bring her back to life. This was not only because they loved her so much, but also because they "needed" her. Otherwise, Sunnydale would be ruled by the Devil. As she came back to life again in a state of shock, she could not recognize anymore if the world she existed in was real or whether it was hell after death. After some rest, she considered the situation she experienced and finally thanked her friend Willow for bringing her back to life.

Buffy: You brought me back. I was in a... I was in Hell. I, um... I can't think too much about what it was like. But it felt like the world abandoned me there. And then suddenly... you guys did what you did.

Terra: It was Willow. She knew what to do.

Buffy: OK. So you did that. And the world came rushing back. Thank you. You guys gave me the world. I can't tell you what it means to me. And I should have said it before.

Willow: You're welcome.⁶

One might analyse this by saying that her friend Willow confused Buffy at first in the boundary between death and life; however, she finally did what was necessary to give Buffy the world back and, thus, happiness as well.

Compared with Buffy, the other slayer, Faith, can be characterized as more self-conscious: "She, unlike most characters in the Buffyverse, knows exactly what she wants and has no qualms about pursuing it. For this reason, her story is not subject to the complicating factors of confusion, self-deception, or indecision, her choices, whether good or evil, and the reasons she makes them are always clear and simple."⁷ Buffy and Faith are building a team while the latter is turning to good. They are both slayers, have the same physical strength, similar bodily shape, and are feminine. If Faith turns to evil, she becomes entirely antagonistic toward Buffy. However, if they build a team, they are playing the roles of doppelgängers in the TV show. The safety and, thereby, the happiness of the city is guaranteed by their collaboration.

2. Between the mission and the freedom of each individual

Buffy's love of Angel addresses the limits of the opposition between good and evil, since the character Angel is in fact undead but not soulless; he is benevolent. The appearance of the characters relates directly to the way they dress. There is already a

⁶ *Buffy, the vampire slayer*. Season 6, episode 3, "After Life".

⁷ South, James B (2013). *Buffy the vampire slayer and philosophy. Fear and trembling in Sunnydale*. Chicago: Open Court, chap. 1 "Living My Own Way, Having a Blast. Faith's Corruption."

study on the meaning of the clothes that the characters wear. For instance, Angel often wears a black suit or a black jacket, which is specifically associated with vampire clothing.⁸ As black clothes have been used ever since the 12th century for death and mourning, this clothing choice “seeks to isolate and distinguish the wearer.”⁹ As Buffy’s mother notices, his world is different from that of Buffy’s. For instance, Angel turns into a killer if he becomes angry and stays in the shadows even during daytime. His emotion influences the life and death of the people. Considering that their love will not last for a lifetime, he decides to leave Buffy’s world. Angel’s isolation from Buffy is symbolically associated with the black clothes he is wearing. The following conversation in the episode “Lover’s walk” contains the impossibility of sublimation of the binaries.

Buffy: I can fool Giles. I can fool my friends.
But I can’t fool myself.
What I want from you, I can never have.
You don’t need me to take care of you anymore.
So I’m gonna go.
Angel: I don’t accept that.
Buffy: You have to.
Angel: Look...
There’s gotta be some way we can still see each other.
Buffy: There isn’t. Tell me that you don’t love me.¹⁰

Angel is living in the hybrid world where he definitely belongs, neither to the traditional world of the undead nor to the human world: he embodies the space in between. He is in fact a demon, but has a soul. There are also moments in which he shows a natural human character. As opposed to this, Buffy is determined to carry out her mission to destroy the demons to the point that her love for a specific individual can be sacrificed.

The second period of Buffy’s romance involves Riley, who assists at the college, and they spend time together in an academic atmosphere. Riley knows that Buffy has an extraordinary power and that she is a slayer. After they meet, several battles take place between Buffy and the demons; consequently, Riley and Buffy develop respect for each other. They seek happiness together that can endure despite and regardless of their physical strength. Nevertheless, this romantic idea cannot be realized over the course of time, especially when Buffy’s mother takes ill and her mind is obsessed with worry.

Riley: You keep me at a distance, Buffy. You didn’t even call me when your mom went into the hospital.
Buffy: Oh, I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I couldn’t take care of you when I thought my mother was dying.
Riley: It’s about me taking care of *you*! It’s about letting me in, so you don’t have to be on top all the time.

⁸ Recht, Markus (2011). *Der sympathische Vampir. Visualisierungen von Männlichkeiten in der TV-Serie Buffy*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, p.114.

⁹ Hollander, Anne (1993). *Seeing through Clothes*. Berkeley & London, p. 377.

¹⁰ *Buffy, the vampire slayer*. Season 3, episode 2, “Lover’s Walk”.

Buffy: But I do. That's part of what being a slayer is. And that's what this is really about, isn't it? You can't handle the fact that I'm stronger than you.

Riley: It's hard sometimes, yeah. But that's not it.

Buffy: Then what? What else do you want from me, Riley? I've given you everything that I have. I've given you my heart, my body, and soul!

Riley: You say that, but I don't feel it. I just don't feel it.

Buffy: Well, whose fault is that? Because I'm telling you, this is it. This is me. This is the package. And if it's so deficient that you need to get your kicks elsewhere, then we really have a problem.¹¹

One of the reasons for the rift could be related to Buffy's physical and also mental strength as a slayer. She is attractive and looks feminine, but also can be characterized as a feminist who is acting independently. This conversation ends Buffy's relationship. In the entire series thereafter, she does not realize romance; therefore, her freedom as an individual also symbolically ends at this moment. Finally, her work as a slayer, to fight for the sake of the people in Sunnydale, becomes her main activity.

3. Unconditional help as a Virtue

In this respect, it is worth asking what the protagonist intends to realize in her mission relating to virtue at the expense of her own individual love. To save human lives represents the central concern of Buffy's altruistic behavior. She is doing this kind of action out of respect for others, which means as a virtue. She never charges for the slayer activity even if her friends ask her to obtain money for her sustenance in her everyday life. This act upholds the principle that human values cannot be measured economically.

In the case of commodities, such as cars and toasters, the proper way of valuing them is to use them, or to make them and sell them for profit. But it's a mistake to treat all things as if they were commodities. It would be wrong, for example, to treat human beings as commodities, mere things to be bought and sold. That's because human beings are persons worthy of respect, not objects to be used.¹²

Human lives cannot be treated similarly to commodities, for the sake of virtue, so that a just act cannot be done for profit. For instance, as Buffy came back to life after the battle with Glory in Season 6, she once discussed with her friends the necessary expenses required to support a family. In this scene, she clearly mentioned and argued that a slayer's act cannot be charged for, since the act is done for saving innocent people's lives.

Buffy: OK, it's bills, it's money. It's pieces of paper sent by bureaucrats that we've never even met. It's not like it's the end of the world. Which is too bad, you know, cos that I'm really good at. I'll take care of this. I promise. I...just don't know how yet.

Anya: I know how. If you wanna pay every bill here, and every bill coming, and have enough to start a nice college fund for Dawn, start charging.

¹¹ Ibid., season 5, episode 10, "Into the Woods".

¹² Sandel, Michael J., *ibid.*, p. 96-97.

Buffy: For what?

Anya: Slaying vampires! You're providing a valuable service to the whole community. I say cash in.

Buffy: Well, that's an idea...*you* would have. Any other suggestions?

Anya: Well, I mean, it's not *so* crazy.

Dawn: Yes, it is! You can't charge innocent people for saving their lives.

Anya: Spider-Man does.

Dawn: He does not.

Anya: Does too.

Dawn: Does no...Xander?

Xander: "Action is his reward."¹³

Hence, Buffy decided to work for financial reasons in a fast food restaurant named Doublemeat Palace, where meat hamburgers are made and sold. This episode about Buffy's other work is filmed in Episode 12 in Season 6. As this episode shows, the act of slaying vampires free of charge upholds that human values cannot be measured in economic terms. In this respect, the TV show thematizes the meaning of respecting human lives as a central subject that is connected with the virtue of justice.

This aspect can be specified by mentioning a moral duty—sometimes, Buffy wants to stay as a normal young woman; however, she can continue her actions since she recognizes that it is more of a duty than a pleasure to help people. Otherwise, thousands of people will be killed in Sunnydale. This means that an action should not be done only for an emotional or personal reason, but should be done because it is the right thing to do. The importance of the motive of duty by doing a just act is discussed by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant:

He [Kant] certainly doesn't think there is anything wrong with acting out of compassion. But he distinguishes between this motive for helping others – that doing the good deed gives me pleasure – and the motive of duty. And he maintains that only the motive of duty confers moral worth on an action.¹⁴

To describe this theoretical thinking, as Sandel cited, this scenario can be offered:¹⁵ if a person suffers a misfortune and he cannot feel sympathy and compassion anymore toward a human being, how he can do any just action for them? For instance, imagine that he suffered in a battle or a natural disaster where many people died. When he notices that his fellow human beings need his help, he goes to help them regardless of his feelings. In this case, the action is done only for the sake of duty and so, "his action has moral worth."¹⁶ In this case, his emotion can temporally change by acting; however, his action is not thereby interrupted, but is done for the sake of the action itself.

If he [the acting person] comes to the aid of other people simply for the pleasure it gives him, then his action lacks moral worth. But if he recognizes a duty to help

¹³ *Buffy, the vampire slayer*. Season 6, episode 4, "Flooded".

¹⁴ Sandel, Michael J., *ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

one's fellow human beings and acts out of that duty, then the pleasure he derives from it is not morally disqualifying.¹⁷

The slayer's activities can be characterized therefore as a mission caused by a moral duty. This perspective is more radicalized when we encounter a Buffy-based robot called Buffybot in Season 6. When Buffy dies in the battle against the evil Glory, Buffybot joins the team and continues helping people against the demons in Buffy's stead. Buffybot stores phrases and situations to know how to react, and therefore, it handles itself almost like a real human being. This situation describes the motive of an action out of a sense of duty in a specified way. Compared with the slayer, Buffybot lacks compassion for people when it first meets them and has no stored memory of them. If those people suffered in a battle, it would also help them because of a sense of duty. Therefore, in this case, the act itself is more important than the feeling of the person.

In this context, it rigorously trains mentally but also physically, following the instructions of its watcher, Giles. To stabilize its virtue, it does not learn it, but acquires it by doing. The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, expressed this aspect as an important category of doing justice:

“Moral virtue comes about as a result of habit.” It's the kind of thing we learn by doing. “The virtues we get by first exercising them. As also happens in the case of the arts as well.” [...] In this respect, becoming virtuous is like learning to play the flute. No one learns how to play a musical instrument by reading a book or listening to a lecture. You have to practice. [...] So it is with moral virtue: “we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.”¹⁸

In the entire series, Buffy always stays on the side of the citizens in Sunnydale in order to maximize their happiness. This action is based on her daily training and patrolling through the city. She represents virtue by doing acts.

Conclusion

This study analyzed Buffy's moral stages as regards her just acts. As to the category of maximizing happiness, utilitarianism, the story about the structure of the fictional city “Omelas” was compared with Sunnydale. The differences and similarities were discussed by interpreting the meaning of an innocent child who sat in a locked cellar as a sacrifice. In the next section, it was presented by how the mission and the individuality in Buffy's life can be balanced. As a slayer, her love for the male character, Angel, was barely realized, since she had a duty to kill the undead even though this world belonged to Angel. Her vacillating between her mission, namely, to fight in the cause of justice, and her love for a vampire was open to interpretation. In the last section, the slayer's acts were characterized as unconditional help corresponding to a virtue. There are three perspectives that should be mentioned in this regard. First, the acts related to the mission were without any remuneration. Second, there is recognition of the duty to help one's fellow human beings, and not to

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 197.

do this just for pleasure. Third, virtue is an attribute that cannot be learned but needs to be practiced. Consequently, the series about the slayer shows the aspects of virtue, especially those relating to the question of performing just acts.

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Contact email: sayaka.oki@hotmail.com