

Death is in the Details: Themes of Mundanity and Minutiae in "The Body"

Buffy the Vampire Slayer was a television series that ran for seven seasons, 1997-2003. The brainchild of Joss Whedon, who wrote the screenplay for the original 1992 film and served as the guiding force behind its move to TV, *BtVS* premiered in mid-season on the WB in 1997. *Buffy* tells the story of Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar), a southern California girl living in Sunnydale, a town built over a "Hellmouth," a center of demonic energy, who fulfills her role as the "one girl in all the world with the strength and skill to fight the vampires." With the continuing help of friends like Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan), Xander Harris (Nicholas Brendon), and her "Watcher," Rupert Giles (Anthony Stewart Head), Buffy battled not only the forces of darkness but her own inner demons. In widely-praised, almost monster-free fifth season episode "The Body," Buffy must face with an anything-but-supernatural-challenge: the death of her mother.

As a show, *Buffy* juxtaposes the real with the unreal and uses this to analyze each more effectively, lensing our view of the mundane with the horror and surreality of a complex mythology of vampires and demons. By filtering our reality through the hobgoblin-imagination of Joss Whedon, we can take a step back and see the wrongs and rights, the hearts and minds of our world more clearly. The show's ability to trivialize the heroic and the fantastic, to weigh down mythological fantasia with the mundanity and minutiae of everyday life is what makes it wholly distinct from most hero-and-villain stories. However, *Buffy*'s complexity lay not only in its ability to effectively dramatize the macabre but also in its argus-eyed narratives of the emotional lives of everyday people. And, no episode more perspicaciously dissects human reactions toward death than "The Body."

During the teaser, we see Buffy arriving home, noticing the flowers of her mother's new suitor, calling up the stairs for her as she has done numerous times before and then pausing. The camera focuses on her face, but we can still make out the background, the living room, with her mother laying dead on the couch. It is interesting to note that among the annals of drama, from television and film, most deaths are experienced on screen, with the actors weepy-eyed, speechifying as the music swells for the forget-me-nots and forever-loves of blatant melodrama; however, when Buffy turns to look at her deceased mother, there is silence, broken only by Buffy, her voice wilting with the pain of sudden realization: her mother may not answer. "Mom? Mom? Mommy?" she whispers, as she reverts to a childlike innocence. And, then we cut to a memory of better times [this memory was inserted, according to the DVD commentary, so the credits would not have to run over top images of a corpse]: friends and family gather[keep in present tense] around the table, enjoying a Christmas meal, a memory that contrasts the solemnity of death with the cheerful mood and after-dinner banter of contentment. Xander praises the food ("I think I'm pretty much ready for barf."), and Dawn and Anya wax philosophical about the true nature of Santa Clause, while Buffy, Giles, and Joyce gather in the kitchen to quip about a burnt pie. This memory is brought to a close by the jolt of a shattering pie plate, the reality of her mother's death rushing back.

And Buffy panics. She falls on her mother and pleads for a response, listening for the long-gone heartbeat, checking for the pulse that does not exist. Once again, we face

the mundanity of the situation as a 911 operator instructs Buffy on the proper procedure for CPR and upon hearing a rib crack as Buffy pumps too hard at her mother's chest. Throughout the episode, we notice the music-less soundtrack, gilt only by the tiny sounds of life plying their trades. The dissection of life and death is given full weight by these small insights, as Buffy pleads with the operator, "She's cold . . . she's not breathing . . . should I make her warm?" When the operator asks her if the body is cold, Buffy snaps, "No, my mother's cold," as she refuses to refer to her mother as just a body. Buffy has toppled the fruit-punch-mouthed Master of all vampires, the Apocalypse-inducing, demon-ascending principal of her high school, and, during season five, quite literally, a diva-god (well, at this point that's in the future, and she will die as a result), but when faced with the simplicity of death, not the fate of the world at-large, but the brain tumor that quietly stole her mother, she is powerless. In a cruel volte-face, it seems as if Buffy's mother will survive as the paramedics arrive and resuscitate her, speeding her to the hospital where the doctors prognosticate, "You're good as new." But, as we cut back to reality, the look of desperation on Buffy's face, she is not alright. After the paramedics leave, Buffy wanders the house, waiting for Giles and the coroner, and, feeling overwhelmed, she vomits. Not the affable puke of the former scene's Xanderism, but the verbally-impossible outpouring of emotion. YES, excellent Once Giles arrives, Buffy warns him, "They told me not to disturb the body." Then the blackest of realizations creeps over her face: "the body." Not Joyce, not mom-mom-mommy, but "the body." Her mother is gone, and Buffy now knows it.

When we cut to Dawn crying in a school bathroom, we assume she is crying over her mother's death, and when an off-screen student criticizes her tears as melodramatic, we take offense. However, Dawn's tears fall not for her mother but for the insipid, though near-universal, melodrama of high school relations. Another interesting contrast that the show makes is that what we cry for in the halls of popularity and luxury are rarely the things that really matter, that ever really cripple us or question us, and yet we cry just as equally, just as truly. Later, in art class, when Dawn chats up a neighboring boy-student about the intense pain she has been going through, we feel sorry for the news she is about to receive. And, when Buffy arrives to break the tragedy, in a beautiful and perfectly executed shot, Whedon separates us from them as Buffy explains their joint loss, the soundtrack haunted only by the ululations of Dawn begging for it not to be true, condemning the recent high school quarrels and the vapidness of any pain she has felt up until this point as meaningless. For a while, she cannot believe it, calling Buffy a liar. During this scene, Whedon cuts to the minutiae of every art class: students carefully penciling their assignments, hands drawing, a white statue. These things have not changed and these students have not changed, but, for Dawn, the whole world has changed.

As Buffy and Dawn suffer, so, too, do the other members of the Scooby gang, as they gather in Tara and Willow's dorm room to discuss the tragedy. However, when faced with the incomprehensibility of death, Willow instead panics about the proper morgue attire. "What about the purple shirt?" she asks. "Purple means royalty," Tara answers. Willow does not want to insult Buffy by dressing improperly in a la-la-la-I-don't-care attitude. "Why can't I dress like a grown-up, can't I be a grown up," she laments. When Xander and Anya enter, they try to analyze the situation – how could it have happened? "Maybe it was Glory," Xander wonders. Surely, this cannot be so

simple, so random as life's basic shifts and somersaults, there has to be an explanation, and, as in our most basic realities, we too ask ourselves: why? Another aspect that this episode illustrates is the mundanity that concerns us and the details we trick ourselves into believing are important, because clothes, questions, and explanations are easier to digest. And, as always, literal-minded Anya breaks in with a pervasive logic, one that cuts through the niceties and attacks what we try to repress, but is, inevitably, what we are all wondering: "Where did she go? Am I supposed to be changing my clothes a lot? Nobody will tell me." As they leave for the morgue, the camera pushes outside the window where Xander's car is being ticketed. Once again, life goes on.

Throughout the episode, at the heading of every act, we see Joyce in a new phase of post-life preparation: first, as a freshly retired corpse, then as a body-bag envelopes her, then as they strip the clothes from her, and, lastly, as she sits on the examining table, cold, lifeless, and absent-eyed. In the waiting-room, the gang tries to comfort Dawn and Buffy, offering food and drink. The room is uncomfortable. As Dawn slips away to the bathroom, and Anya, Willow, and Xander leave to get food, Buffy and Tara discuss, awkwardly, the terrors of a no-mom life and the indescribable feelings they want so badly to communicate. But, when the gang returns to find Dawn is still missing, Buffy goes searching. In the examining room, Dawn wanders past the newly-dead bodies, looking for her mother, and as she approaches the last covered body, she pauses. A vampire rises in the background, and Buffy bursts in, saving Dawn, but not before the vamp rips the sheet from Joyce's body; now, like never before, Buffy and Dawn, prompted by death incarnate, finally realize their mother is now just a vacant body. "Where did she go," Dawn asks.

"The Body" brilliantly exposes the dots and details that make death so true, excruciating, and inevitable. Across the ever-pogroms of Hell-mouth life, Buffy was beset by the Sunnydale hoi-polloi-turned-bumpy-headed evil-doers, but not by any reality other than the dust-after-death mentality. When Buffy's mom dies, she is not dealt with so casually, not with quip but with qualm, and in the face of this meditation, *we* realize that if death bleeds hearts so dryly in the Whedon-verse, our mortality can cut just as deeply, too.

“The Body.” Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Dir. Joss Whedon. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, Inc. 27 Feb. 2001.