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"A Little More Soul Than is Written": James Marsters' Performance of Spike and the Ambiguity of Evil in Sunnydale

"James is an amazing actor who loves, loves, loves the process. . . ."
David Fury, speaking about directing James Marsters in "Lies My Parents told Me" (DiLullo)

[1] Anyone attentive to fan affective response towards Spike as a character in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is aware of how the fans' view of the moral good within Spike went beyond the writers' and the actor's own expectations. Many fans came to empathise with Spike, well before the story said it was permissible to believe in the possibility of his redemption (Symonds). As one commentator has pointed out, by the time the story catches up with what the actor already performs, ongoing revelation of the soul of the character, we feel that it is an addendum to an organic growth: "Spike is dead, but he hasn't disengaged from life. And in Marsters' agile, richly textured performance, you sensed Spike's soulfulness long before he had a soul" (Millman) In the story it is the demon in the cave who gives Spike his soul in the finale to Season Six. However, while fans of the character responded to what they perceived as "soul-having" behaviour in Spike's storyline due to the power of the redemption story itself, such response was also a result of James Marsters' mesmerising performance in the role. Annette Hill's empirical research into the complexity of audience identification with characters who do evil, violence, or are transgressive has shown that audience "feelings fluctuate according to context, characterization and personal opinion" and that even terms like identification are inadequate to describe the variety of audience responses that included terms such as "sympathy," "empathy," "relate," "feel for," "understand" as qualifiers to identification (40-41). Hill explores the choices viewers make to engage with a transgressive character, but the point is that we are engaged, sometimes because of the context and sometimes beyond it. While James Marsters views the acting process as one of allegiance to the meaning of the text, he has also stated that "I'm always trying to play a little more soul than is written" when discussing his performance of Spike (Bernstein 22). In this assertion of the "soul," the good, that exists within Spike prior to his ensouling at the end of Season Six, Marsters draws attention to a creative space where the actor can own his performance independent of the storyline. This is a performance space where the actor can extend text into a more morally complex vehicle for affective impact beyond the intentions of the text, even as it fulfills those intentions.

[2] Bruce Beresford, the Australian film director, has said that even while directing he can forget himself in the face of an actor's performance: "Sometimes I watch actors and it's so exciting I completely forget to call 'Cut!' . . . What they were doing was so good, *so* engaging that it just carried me away" (123). Any viewer attentive to the subtleties of James Marsters' performance as Spike in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is "under the spell of the actor" (Gibson 47). Ross Gibson, in his book *Falling For You,* uses that phrase to define what he calls a transformative state experienced by the audience in response to presence in a great actor, a state physically

equivalent to holding your breath. The romantic élan of such a view of the "spell" of a performance approximates the more popular ideas of acting as having "charisma" or "chemistry," often attached to the actor's tour de force in the role: "James Marsters, the charismatic American actor who plays the British Spike. . . ." (Millman). However, what a term like "charisma" might mean in Marsters' performance needs further definition. Those of us in academia who write on the show have noted the power of the performance but have made little attempt to define or analyse its impact, despite that performance being one of the most crucial factors in audience reception of the show, and of the show's exploration of evil in Sunnydale.[1] With due humility, James Marsters himself is aware that more than his acting contributes to the impact of his performance: "The words aren't mine, the camera placement isn't mine. There are so many things that make me look cool and I'm not doing it" (Shadowkat). Yet the fact remains that the performance stands out from all other performances on the show and has a crucial impact on the exploration of violence as transgression in the story. In her book *The Actor Speaks,* Janet Sonenberg reminds us that "Great acting is not magic," that it is an interplay of "talent, technique and inspiration" and an acting process (1-2). It is the explicit nature of Marsters' acting process, as he has revealed it in statements on his role and in the performance of Spike's redemption from evil, that is a key to audience identification with the character.

[3] In answering questions about his acting over the years, James Marsters emerges as a practitioner who brings to his performance a personal candour and professional intensity. The use of the personal psychological platform and emotional vulnerability that forms the basis of Method acting accounts for some of the intensity of his performance of Spike:

> I think the Method is very conducive for film and television because the Method is suspending your disbelief like you're asking the audience to. So you build an imaginary world and then release yourself into it. Sean Penn calls it the Cage. Meryl Streep calls it the Box. I call it the Sandlot. But basically, once you know the parameters of the world, you can improvise and you cannot make a mistake, because you're in the world, basically. (Lameal2002 and Laurie)

As a method actor, using that form of concentrated immersion in a role, Marsters has often spoken of the personal effects finding character motivation has had on him emotionally and psychologically. He has been quoted as saying to the writer and Executive Producer Marti Noxon: "You just cannot hide around here. You guys just take your pens and pencils and you just come right into the soul . . ." (Lameal2002). For Marsters, the exploration of "personal demons" is still about being "true to the material":

> Acting gives me a chance to excise my demons, to explore my insecurities . . . especially on a show that writes so close to the bone as this one does. You can't get away with not being pretty honest about yourself and be true to the material. I kind of feel like

> I'm on this roller coaster that is twice as scary as the one I thought I was going to get on. (Lameal2002)

Giving an example of that sense of personal risk, Marsters has spoken extensively of the emotional cost of this acting process in relation to his performance in the attempted rape scene in the Season Six episode, “Seeing Red” (6019): "Yeah, the worst of it was the bathroom scene. I went home in tears. I was crying in the bathtub, ‘I'm not a rapist.’ Oh, that was horrible” (Lameal2002). That sense of personal risk the actor feels in his art is used in a portrayal that is raw with emotional depths. The personal cost of performance is associated for the actor with the way the performer makes the character believable, linking into personal experiences and then portraying authentic human emotions in character. Such emotions are the basis for creating a sense of the complexity of Spike as a character; what it feels like to yearn for requited love; what it feels like to be conflicted in the desire to do good; what it is for Spike to be a human in the skin of a vampire:

> That's what you discover . . . that human beings are really complicated, beautiful, horrifying, wonderful things. And if you get the courage just to say that I'm not going to hide behind a mask of a character but I'm going to use acting to reveal my real self. (Lameal2002)

Some level of personal revelation, for Marsters, fuels character complexity.

[4] Apart from viewing his technique in revelatory Method terms, he has also talked of the ways the transfer from theatrical performance to television has impacted on his role in storytelling to use such character complexity to reach out to an audience’s sense of the possibilities of plot development:

> I miss the stage. The stage is cool. On stage you're really in control in a way that you're not in control on TV at all. On stage you tell a story, in film you're just a building block for someone else to come tell the story later and that was kind of a hard adjustment for me. They wouldn't even tell me what I was doing next week. (Lameal2002)

Consideration of the actor’s role in the light of such limitations has led to a strong sense of the impact he is trying to have as an actor on the viewer of Spike’s story. When discussing the loss of control an actor has when doing television work, where he has little or no advance knowledge of his character’s arc, he has noted the way his sense of being closer to his character is invigorated by plot uncertainty. What he has called being "in the same room as Spike": "I keep myself in the dark on purpose because it's kind of refreshing to just be like Spike and not know and to just fight for what you want week to week and hope you get it" (Lameal2002). The actor is using what is unknown in the story to explore character motivation in a space that is not determined by a pre-determined plot or arc or even by prior characterisation. Sonenberg talks of the possibilities of such an approach:

Actors who leap to early classifications of characters or to immutable choices to mitigate their discomfort may produce indicated, one-dimensional performances. All good acting processes…allow for periods of not knowing. They supply structures the actor can imaginatively explore where the answers may be found. They give the actor the confidence to work toward the unknown result because they've proven, over time, that a moment inevitably arrives when the actor comes to know. (8-9).
This form of acting, in which Spike's potential for redemption is determined moment by moment, was combined by Marsters with an intent to strive for an empathic response from the audience, the "hook" that would lead to audience sympathy for, and understanding of, the character in all of his incarnations. The pre-vamped William, his character's identity before he is transformed into Spike, whom we meet in a flashback scene in the episode "Fool for Love" (5007), was one such challenge: "I wanted so much for the audience to hook into him because really, when Joss was writing stuff like, 'I know I'm a bad writer, but I'm a good man', that's Joss. So I wanted to be true to that . . ." (Lameal2002). In his acceptance speech for the 2004 Spacey Awards, James Marsters talked of missing the "moment to moment" interaction and communication with the audience that occurs in theatre performance but noted that the awareness of that communication still influences his performance: "I feel like I've been reaching out over the years during all the takes and stuff, knowing that there were people watching and there were people who were interested and I feel like you guys are reaching back." He aimed for a particularity of impact, a relationship with the viewer, as he performed in the present story moment of Spike's character development. The hook for Marsters was to encourage the viewer to care about his character of William/Spike and, through the screen, to create a relationship with his unseen audience.

[5] Despite not knowing what was coming next for his character, Marsters wished to portray forward movement for Spike, particularly in the face of the solidification of Spike's image as defined by the emblematic aspects of his character– such as Spike's coolly evil, black leather coat:

> I guess, if it's not broke don't fix it, you know. And I guess having one look kind of helped solidify the character in the audience's mind, but then when I got on the show and was on the screen more, I was really arguing to change the look of the character. I kept saying if we keep him in the same costume, we're communicating to the audience that he's the same person. That there's nothing more to learn from him, about him. So, I was always trying to get something new going. (Lameal2002)

Crucially for what is seen on screen, Marsters' desire to portray character progression, complexity, and potential was independent of what was archetypal about the character. Given the character entered the Buffyverse as a disposable villain, graduated to a morally confused assistant to the heroine on her journey, finally finding his own redemption in death in a story arc that developed as the series progressed, Marsters used story uncertainty to telegraph the possibility of Spike's redemption even within the trappings of the comic villain and the comic anti-hero. The British actor Simon Callow has talked of "trying to find the archetypal in a character" as a means to preparing for a role and thus to "submit to his (the character's) ideas and impressions of the world" (10). There is no

need to jettison the archetype while going deeper. For Marsters, Spike could wear the coat as archetype of evil while he took the performance to a more nuanced level.

[6] During his years on the show Marsters was aware of fan desire to see Spike redeemed:

> Striving for that emotional resonance is really what artists are about, and we shouldn't shy away from it. I think that redeeming Spike is something that people in their hearts have wanted for a long time. I've seen a lot of T-shirts around that say, "Love. Redemption. Spike." Spike's love of Buffy sent him on his journey to get his soul back. (Interview with James Marsters. *Dreamwatch*)

However, in other print interviews and Question and Answer appearances at fan conventions, partially in response to such fan hopes in Season Six, he commented in condemnatory terms on Spike as the heroine's boyfriend, and on that character's status as a "cool" representation of evil—an effort to counteract the fan "sympathy for the devil" that his own performance was partially responsible for:

> I became that unhealthy boyfriend that many girls have in their life, the bad boy who might be really sexy and dangerous and gets their sexual stuff firing, but the girls end up getting burned by it. That storyline played out so dramatically, I thought that the character probably should be killed off. I didn't know if he'd be redeemable after Season Six. (Interview with James Marsters. *Dreamwatch*)

The concern with impact on the audience of his sympathetic portrayal of a character that went on to attempt to rape the heroine, Buffy, led to Marsters' unease with the negative impact empathy for the character, or the character's allure, might have on the real life motivations of female viewers:

> When he thought the chip was out, he went straight for a victim and if it wouldn't have been for the chip, he would have killed that girl, right? [audience says no] Yeah . . . maybe, I know you want to believe but . . . girls, repeat after me: "If a man is mean, he'll be mean to me." (Lameal2002 and Laurie)

This expressed concern that young women not take the wrong message for their own life experience from his empathic portrayal of a "bad" boyfriend for the heroine is bound up with the explicit canon of the Buffyverse, dictating that without a soul Spike could not be redeemed.

[7] One of the writers and executive producers, David Fury, rather more vehemently, also voiced concern that fans who were "shippers" (supporters) of the Spike and Buffy relationship were missing the moral point:

> To those who feel my conviction that Spike can never be redeemed and cannot someday end up with our heroine, shows a lack of imagination of my part, I say you're right. It is beyond my limited imagination to see a strong, independent, female character end up

> falling for a murderer who would be killing innocent people were he not suffering from chip affliction…I regret I don't have the creative mind that, say, Thomas Harris has when he saw fit to sell out the character of Clarice Starling by having her become lovers with a cannibalistic psychopath, charming and brilliant as he may be…For those of you who fault my thinking, I can only say I'll try to be more open minded in the future. In the meanwhile, S/B shippers, you can go back to writing your penpals, Richard Ramirez and the Hillside Strangler, and I hope they finally accept your marriage proposals. (Allyson)

As Allyson, the web mistress of the Fury website and interviewer went on to say in her review of the controversy amongst Spike fans those remarks engendered: "Thus began a long battle with people who believe that Fury was being offensive to fans. His view was that a character that had spent two hundred years killing people and eating them, and then threatened to murder the woman who he professed to love if she didn't reciprocate, is not a good." It may be that Marsters and Fury underestimate the media literacy of viewers on this issue, and in general. It might be useful to view Mr Marsters' and Mr Fury's concerns about the portrayal of Spike's attempt to rape Buffy in the light of what Hill has called the "reactive mechanisms of thresholds and self-censorship" with which audiences view violence (51). In her empirical research into audience reception of violence, Hill has defined thresholds as the violence we personally find disturbing and self-censorship as the choices we make to view or not to view. Even James Marsters has said that he has often chosen or rejected roles as an actor on the basis of the context of the fictional violence he is asked to portray:

> It's very scary because sometimes on this show you're asked to do things that—there have been things on this show that I've been asked to do that if a movie came along that asked me to do those things, I might have passed…[Someone in the audience suggests like playing a rape scene.]…I don't like that. I can't even watch a movie where that's in there. I get up and want to kill the guy. It's my personal issue. So, that was one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life, not even as a job, because Sarah and I are friends. I told Joss, "Nobody's safe around here. You cut right to the bone, dude. This is not a safe show." (Topel)

The complexities of viewer response are no less emphatic when it comes to viewing or interpreting what they see on screen. Hill's results, in line with a wealth of audience reception research, shows us that viewers are aware of the complexity of their own responses to violence and violent characters and of the role personal tolerances and the choice to engage with such characters play in boundary testing and in the decision to identify with such characters.

[8] It may be necessary to dispense with the question of whether it is morally wrong to care about Spike, or any other transgressive character, in whole or in part. It is a question that assumes that most viewers who do sympathise are media illiterates who cannot tell fantasy from fiction, or who cannot respond with moral awareness to a nuanced performance that involves the delineation of moral complexity. Viewers come to a work of fiction with a media literate suspension of disbelief that allows them to care without losing the moral compass with which they live

their daily lives. Audience reception studies such as Hill's have noted overwhelmingly how media literate and morally independent viewers are in their reception responses. They are aware, they reason, they ignore, they critique their responses, they choose and, above all, they identify emotionally in context, as they move from media event to event. In a section on "Aesthetics: the Beauty of Crime" in the book *The Sopranos and Philosophy,* Noel Carroll, James Harold, and Mike Lippman, in separate articles, engage in the debate over whether viewer sympathies with a reprehensible character like the successful sociopath and family man Tony Soprano are morally acceptable. All three offer insight but, typically, they are caught up, as Fury and Marsters are, with whether viewers *should* feel some form of viewer guilt or responsive discomfort for such sympathy. Since audiences do identify, the point may be moot to begin with. Identification, in all the range of responses that Hill defines it, is not just about cathartic viewer self-indulgence in bewitching and repressed forbidden desires. Carroll rightly describes the viewer as forming a moral alliance with Tony Soprano "within the relational structure of the fictional world" ("Sympathy" 129). In other words, who viewers identify or sympathise with depends on context. Quoting the Executive Producer of *The Sopranos*, David Chase, quoting Renoir's *Rules of the Game,* he notes that "the problem is that everyone has his reasons" ("Sympathy" 135). To flip that quote, the very "reason" we identify with characters like Tony Soprano or Spike is that "everyone has his problems." Viewers care because Tony Soprano and Spike have a hard time of it. If stories have a point beyond mere passing the time, it is that they explore the moral and emotional complexity of the human condition. The viewer caring for a character is a response to interpretative complexity provoked by the story and the acting performance.

[9] The "sympathy for the devil" response is built into the story about, as well as the performance of, Spike. It is notoriously easy for an audience to sympathise with the character who is the underdog, who is on the outside trying to get in, whatever the moral baseline he starts from. In response to a question I put to him at a fan convention in Australia, asking for his opinion on why so many female viewers identified with his character, even in a show that offered them a female heroine with which to identify,[2] James Marsters replied that he felt it had to do with the fact that, on a show where the core characters were initially the outsiders, Spike was even further "outside" (Marsters, "Q & A"). It is hardly surprising that Spike's exclusion from an acceptance he so passionately desires from Buffy, the woman he loves, and the constant rebuffing of his attempts to reform by Buffy and the Scoobies, created empathy in the audience. Who among any viewing audience has not felt excluded at one time or another? While there are more morally acceptable characters, such as the Scoobies, with which viewers can ally in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, their own character failings, often morally compromising in their personal relationships, narrowed the moral gap between them and the all too human, aspirational, morally conflicted anti-hero that Spike became. In his discussion of audience identification with the morally corrupt Tony Soprano on *The Sopranos,* James Harold quotes Plato's view of the hero's journey as one where we "take his sufferings seriously" (143). Viewer empathy allows all suffering to be taken seriously, hero or not. Spike's status as outsider, rejected, unrequited lover and morally conflicted vampire, and intense human suffering, encouraged viewers to care.

[10] Alternatively, the written premise of the Buffyverse, that a demon/vampire without a soul is evil and unredeemable, is well supported in the text and Marsters' performance is in a conflicting relationship with that canon. The audience knows Spike is evil because the "good guys" in the story, characters like Xander and the heroine Buffy, and the writers in off-screen interviews as well, tell them so. Spike's actions in the story also support the fact that he is evil. Spike does some pretty unpleasant things like killing people and attempting to rape the heroine. However, other actions by Spike in the story seem to raise the possibility that he can be better than his vampiric nature defines. In an article illustrating how screenwriters telegraph to the audience that a newly introduced character might have some good in him, Chris Hewitt talks of a characterisation technique called "petting the dog"—where a screenwriter will have an unlikable character do something sentimental we can admire, to counter a first impression we have that he is not someone we should admire. The quintessential scene he quotes to illustrate the techniques is Jack Nicholson's character in *As Good As It Gets*: "He's this miserable, racist, homophobic creep, but he likes that little puppy in the hallway, so you think, 'He's OK. Who cares if he hates people'." Similarly, in one of the very first scenes where the audience meets Spike, in "School Hard" (2003), he is shown as caring and concerned about his clearly insane, vampire lover Drusilla. Significantly, he immediately shifts from vamp face to his human one as his tone of voice softens as he speaks to her. A loving human trait is emphasised, even as he enters as the villain.

[11] The audience also knows Spike is evil, because he himself is at pains to assert it: "She thinks I'm confused because she's confused. I'm not confused. I know what I am. I'm a killer. I'm evil" ("Smashed," 6009). However, ironically, Spike makes that assertion as he is trying to work himself up to killing a girl in an alley— under the illusion that the behaviour chip implanted in him to stop him hurting humans has ceased functioning— in the episode "Smashed." Playing against the words, Marsters' performance clearly feeds the audience perception that Spike has the potential for redemption and is suffering as he wrestles with the urge to kill again. Ironically, not wrestling against it, but to follow it through. "Look at all the goodies," Spike appreciatively drools as he surveys the populace in the alley. However, when the girl he is stalking screams in fright, his satisfaction at her fear, "That's right, you should scream," is more an attempt to assert the old order of his existence. The verb "should" is less confident than relieved that someone is screaming in fright at the sight of him. Hanging around with the heroes, he has not had that response in a while. This is the way his existence on the Hellmouth "should" play out: "Creature of the night here, yeah? Some people forget that."[3] Spike is right here; we have forgotten that. "Smashed" is an episode well into Season Six. We have not seen him kill any human since Season Four's "Harsh Light of Day" (4003) when, in his pre-chip days, he kills the owner of the Magic Box.

> SPIKE: Just 'cause she's confused about where she fits in, I'm supposed to be too? 'Cause I'm not. I know what I am. I'm dangerous. I'm evil.
> WOMAN: I-I'm sure you're not evil.
> SPIKE: Yes, I am. I am a killer. That's what I do. I kill. And, yeah, maybe it's been a long time, but . . . it's not like you forget how. ("Smashed")

As he paces back and forth trying to work himself up to biting the girl it is increasingly obvious that he is not sure who he is, for all he is spouting the premise of the Buffyverse that he is a dangerous killer. He is more than out of practice, he seems less than enthusiastic about the act itself. James Marsters conveys this particularly in the way he pauses as he seems to be asking the girl, himself, and viewer in general for endorsement of the truth of what he is saying:

> Spike: You just (pause) do it. And now I can (pause) again, all right? So here goes. ("Smashed")

That redundant and questioning "all right," and the announcement of impending action, "so here goes" hang there, seeking reassurance. He is talking to himself, of course. It is he who has no answer, who cannot say for sure that all is right with his sense of his evil self. He does not know who he is. Spike then morphs into vamp face and tries to bite the girl. The viewer is not left in much doubt that, if the chip had stopped functioning, Spike would have bitten the girl. Drew Z. Greenberg, the writer for this episode, in his commentary to "Smashed" on the Season Six DVD set, comments that Spike is a conflicted character in this scene. He voices his own uncertainty as to whether the point of the scene is just that it confirms Spike is evil:

> I'm not so sure that's exactly what's going on. I think it's important to leave some of the subtlety to the viewer…to figure out what's going on for yourself. And I'm not even sure that it's particularly clear. I think that Spike is a conflicted character, just like all the characters on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. He's got a lot of things going on and if you pay attention, you can see that he has to psyche himself up to the biting. So the question becomes does he want to bite the girl, or does he want to want to bite the girl. He has to do a lot of convincing himself, so what does that mean? I dunno, I'm just the writer.

With his somewhat flippant, "I dunno, I'm just the writer," Greenberg is acknowledging the role of audience reception and the actor's performance in interpretation. It is to the audience that Marsters, pursuant to his acting credo, reaches out in his performance here. What we are given by the words, and Masters performance, is the destruction of Spike's desire to do evil from within.

[12] This dissolving immorality is strikingly present, in the performance alone, in the scene in "Crush" (5014), when a chipped Spike is offered a newly killed girl to drink by Drusilla, his vampire ex-girlfriend, in the Bronze on her brief return to Sunnydale. This acting of Spike's indecision and hesitancy is quintessential Marsters. There is no dialogue. Attention is drawn away from the lifeless body in Spike's arms as the camera focuses on Spike's face and we are held in suspense, waiting for Spike's decision to drink or not. There is no rush to drink as Marsters has Spike look back at Drusilla, trying to decide if he can trust her, trust himself, trust any decision at all? We do not know; it is all possible. Spike's chest rises and falls as the actor breathes more rapidly, there is tremor in his face, his gaze intent. Then, as if mustering all his willpower, Spike decides as the actor pauses and then lunges, and Spike brutally

drinks from the dead body. Bert States, commenting on the phenomenology of acting in theatrical production, points out the sense in which there is a "narrator hiding in the actor" in the way in which, as he performs, he can shift between self-expressive and representational modes, as well as take on a collaborative mode with the audience. The utility of looking at performance this way, as States says, is that it allows for audience selectivity:

> In other words, it is not a simple matter of following the "intention" of the speaker but of abandoning one's senses to the shifting appeals of the speech (and the actor's speech, of course, should be understood to include gesture, presence, and all the aspects of his performance of the role). (24)

This view also allows us more awareness of the way an actor is both playing and representing the character. While on a television screen and cinema, unlike the theatre, the audience's sense of both the actor and the character are framed by editing, lighting, music etc, it is still true that the actor himself can draw audience attention to the illusive aspects of the art and create a space in which he himself can comment on the action independent of other aspects of his speech or the plot. In this dialogue free action in the Bronze, the subtlety of Marsters' portrayal makes us aware of the process of the acting itself and of the effect it has on representation, of the techniques that create the performance and extend what is written, of the elements in Marsters' performance that keep the viewer suspended, momentarily, between will he or won't he drink from the girl?

[13] In a discussion of the non-verbal physical actions in Samuel Becket's *Act Without Words I*, Zarilli discusses"acting specifically without reaching conclusions" as a moment of theatrical action that does not prefigure the outcome (197). It is in such a way that the door to the character's redemption is kept open in the above scene, and later in "Smashed" when Spike tries to bite the girl in the alley. It is the tantalizing nature of that ever present redemptive potential in the performance of the character that makes for a powerful affective audience impact when Spike does fail to do the right thing. Spike loves Buffy and, because of her, he spends most of his time from Season Five on doing good and fighting on her side. Friedrich Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* has said that those who fight monsters should take care that they do not become monstrous. With Spike the opposite is true. In conflict with his monstrous self, Spike reveals that he is very much in danger of becoming the good man he was before he was vamped: "I know I'm a bad poet but I'm a good man and all I ask is that . . . that you try to see me" ("Fool for Love"). William/Spike's pre-vamped plea to Cecily, a rejecting and haughty Victorian lady of his poetic dreams, could be the mantra of his journey through the Buffyverse. As he struggles to do good, he wants Buffy, in particular, to see him, to see that he is capable of redemption. Buffy says to Ford, a human who wants to be a vampire that he will not be himself after being vamped: "Well, I've got a newsflash for you, braintrust: that's not how it works. You die, and a demon sets up shop in your old house, and it walks, and it talks, and it remembers your life, but it's not you" ("Lie to Me," 2007). Except with Spike, something of the good man has survived and that layer to the character is suggestively telegraphed in the actors performance.

[14] In discussing the director Cassavetes' use of improvisation, Kouvaros notes, "His technique is designed to open the moment of filming to those gestures, actions and movements not determined in advance by the script," to aspects of an actors performance that tell us more than the script determines (55). The position of the spectator created by such a performance is one in which the viewer of Spike's journey finds himself emotionally ahead of the story and increasingly at odds with its moral premise. By the time Spike goes off to get a soul, many fans thought the possession of the soul as a indicator of redemption was overrated, that Spike did not need one to be redeemed, and that he was morally superior to many of the human characters who possessed one. That fan sympathy impacted the storyline. The Executive Producer, Marti Noxon, has acknowledged that there was a need to counter audience sympathy for Spike by having him attempt to rape Buffy in order to give the character a moral imperative to seek a soul (Symonds). It is less well documented that the redemption storyline itself was a result of that same empathic audience response to Marsters' performance. James Marsters noted on receiving honorary membership to a fan group: "I thank you for being on line calling for that [Redemption], by the way. Joss *does* go on line and he *did* hear you. And there is *no* way you're going to give Joss Whedon an idea for his show, but if you plant seeds, *maybe* he'll get his own. And something tells me you guys had a hand in that. In the soul" (Marsters, Honorary Proclamation). Joss Whedon has voiced that there was story uncertainty about where Spike was heading that mirrors the character's uncertainty about himself, and the conflict the potential the actor was intent upon portraying. In answer to a fan question at the *Nocturne* convention asking how far was it possible for the character to go in being "a real hero figure," he said:

> That's one of the questions we're asking ourselves now as we break. Next season, is like, y'know, 'cause Spike has done very selfless things, he's shown real caring, and at the same time he can be a complete pain in the butt. We don't know the answer to that, and we're sort of gonna feel our way around and find out. And different writers have different opinions about how heroic he's been and his motivations and what's gone on, and we debate about it a lot. The only thing I can tell you is it's a real issue for us: where he is he heading and how far can we take him in that direction and still feel that we're being true to the character? (Valente)

Joss Whedon is talking about Season Five Spike and uses the term "debate" to describe how there were differing opinions amongst the writers about Spike's final moral and heroic fate. The capacity for heroism and redemption hanging in the balance continued to develop in the storyline and in the performance. The unpredictability of that fate even for those plotting the storyline and the humanity and fallibility of the character's capacity for evil as well as good, created the performance space for the actor to reach out to the audience to convince it that redemption was possible.

[15] As a part of his answer to my question to him at the Australian fan convention mentioned above, Marsters added that the more the scripts required he portray evil, the more he was doing everything he could in his performance to show potential for the opposite (Marsters, "Q & A"). At a

Shore Leave convention, the actor was asked why a redeemable Spike appealed to many fans over an evil Spike?

> Because I was doing everything I humanly could . . . with my eyes . . . and with my acting. . . . Yeah, it was my feeling that it was my job to keep the character something that.… I didn't want anyone . . . oh man . . . see, the more evil they put him in the writing, the more I thought it was my responsibility to keep something that you could latch into . . . and I guess they went for the acting not the writing [laughing] no . . . they're having their cake and eating it too. Basically, [sigh as he gathers his thoughts] the way the drama functions is that you go through the story behind the eyes of the lead character. So everybody here, when you guys are watching *Buffy*, male or female, you guys are Buffy right? And so effectively, you guys have to want Spike to be better just as Buffy's hoping that she can find something in Spike that's better and that she's not as big of a fool as she thinks she's being . . . so it was really important for me to keep tempting you guys to think there could be a good resolution to this. . . . (Lameal2002 and Laurie)

Trying to define the power of a performance in the creation of a moment in a performance and discussing breathing and eye movements, Gibson denotes breathing and looking as the basic skills of the actor: "by concentrating on the eyes and aspirations of the actors, the audience feels a direct relationship with the performer." Thus "through the proxy of the actor, you can feel how the dramatic world exerts itself on the flesh and blood of your representative, this fallible human quester," so that "spoken performances can be inspiring. Literally so. Thrillingly so. And distressingly so" (40-42). If there is some kind of viewer seduction involved in the way an audience responds to acting, then how that seduction is working, the much quoted "charisma," is about the technique invested in the performance. Murray Smith, citing Wolfenstien and Leites, aptly describes the "imaginative slumming" the spectator indulges in with the "good-bad" character who has redeeming aspects that mitigate wrongdoing (224). In our enjoyment of Spike's glee in his villainy, viewers are certainly engaging in that form of viewing self-indulgence. However, if that were all that was happening then David Fury's view of the perversity of audience attraction to an immoral Spike would be the end of the matter. Joss Whedon in his commentary to the series' finale "Chosen" (7022), on the Season Seven DVDs, speaks of Marsters' "ability to turn on a dime," referring to his ability to create pathos and comedy as he dies in that episode with his delivery of the line about his soul stinging as it burns him from the outside: "The idea of the soul as the thing that elevates and kills him felt like a good wrap up and again, going from the epic to the humorous in a heartbeat, that's our boy." The sardonically curious wonder and dryness with which Marsters delivers Spike's line that he can feel his soul and it "kinda stings," a fittingly comic acceptance of the consequences of having a soul, undercuts any sentimentality entering the complicated portrayal Marsters gives us of Spike's final moments. Audience response to the performance prior to that death was not simply about overlooking Spike's evil but of choosing to respond primarily to the character's heartfelt desire to change for the sake of love. Marsters' performance is not encouraging the audience to respond amorally, but to ally itself with profoundly positive human emotions, with Spike's yearning for love and the character's deep desire to be better than he is.

[16] Frustratingly, Spike fans were aware of the irony that this was not supposed to be Spike's journey and that, as the demon foil to Buffy's heroic journey, he was only supposed to be the sideshow. This journey threatened the show's black and white premise in a storyline that involved characters making complex moral choices in a fictional world that started out with the demons as the polar opposites of the heroes. The fictional complexity of Marsters' portrayal of Spike's choices, in the context of the character's aspirations to be a better man for the sake of love, invited an empathic response from the audience because the chance of the failure of those aspirations was always very real. The fact that, relative to the other Scoobies, Spike is the only character the audience sees struggling in quite this way, with no support and constant rejection of his aims, inevitably increased sympathy. Such sympathy is fully cognisant of the fact that what is evil about Spike is not an attractive or moral trait in the world outside the screen. However, such awareness is not incompatible with audience empathy for his struggle to be a better man. No Scooby character, including Buffy, is perfect or without internal conflict, including moral indecisiveness. Audience perceptiveness can take account of that moral relativity in judging the character of Spike. Nor is that empathy excessive if, at times, it leads the audience to feel he may be morally superior to the heroes—such as in his refusal to fight back when Buffy beats him in the alley in "Dead Things" (6013). As one critic, commenting on Spike's revelation to Buffy that he has regained his soul, has noted, Marsters' portrayal of Spike's struggle was emotionally wrenching and, ultimately, "haunting":

> Viewers saw proof of that in the haunting final scene of this season's best episode to date, "Beneath You" [7002], in which Spike revealed his soul to Buffy in an empty, moonlit church. Marsters gave Spike's madness and despair a moving, shattered dignity. There was something Shakespearean in his readings of lines like "Why does a man do what he mustn't but for her; to be hers," delivered in half-darkness, and in the devastating last shot: Spike striking a martyr's pose—draped around a large cross, bare back to the camera, flesh smoldering—for a love that Marsters calls "unquenchable." (Millman)

Emotional engagement with a story, and the moral evaluation that accompanies it, is the launching pad for imaginative contemplation of what it means to be human that fiction allows the audience to explore. Viewers do not morally debase themselves when they use stories to consider the deeply profound questions that Spike's fate dramatises:

> "You really can't change yourself for someone else," concludes Marsters. . . . "You really have to do it for yourself in the end. I think I would've said that he would've done it for Buffy at the end of last season, but after going through this season, I think he wanted to become a better person for himself. And he did." (Interview with James Marsters. *Dreamwatch*)

Consumed by fire as the Hellmouth crumbles around him, Spike does die to save the world. Believing that Buffy does not love him, sardonic even at the last about his souled status, he chooses to do good for its own sake. Even David Fury, in his commentary on the Season Seven episode "Lies My Parents Told Me" (7017), came around in the end:

> There's been a lot of controversy with my opinions about Spike and about his, the nature of Spike and a lot of people are concerned why is Spike, why is Spike letting her talk to him in that way? Why is he so hurt? He's a vampire. Why would he? And I think that was the point of this episode. It was to say Spike is an anomaly in the vampire world. He has some facet of his soul even if it was removed when he became a vampire. He has more humanity as a vampire than most vampires do. We haven't explained why that is but perhaps something about the character of him as a man, and he's retained it as a vampire.

That "something about the character" that Fury cannot define can be found in James Marsters' performance.

[17] Frank Renzulli, a writer on *The Sopranos*, himself an actor, has described the way in which an actor sometimes has to bridge two opposing and unrelated realities when delivering dialogue:

> There's usually a logic, there's a logic to the thought process and then, sometimes as in life, there's a non-sequitur. You know, talking about something, "how're your kids doing?," "blue cheese, I love blue cheese." So if you wrote that, the actor's got to find that bridge. He sometimes has to find the bridge from "how're your children" to "blue cheese." When you're on the set, if he's not finding that bridge, you're going to have to build one or help him out somehow. (Chase)

Perhaps evil was the non-sequitur of good in Spike's case when he started his journey as the comic villain. It is a vast performance chasm to reach across to convincingly portray the moral leap from evil to good, from monster to hero that Spike made. In a subtle portrayal, holding in play two apparently unambiguous moral realities, James Marsters found that bridge in an acting space beyond the words. The audience came to believe in Spike's unambiguous and heroic redemption because of that performance and, undoubtedly, Joss Whedon and the writers did too. In her brilliant and exhaustive article on *The Pitfalls of the TV Medium*, Shadowkat cites James Marsters in her discussion of *The Importance of The Actors: Can They Really Break or Make the Show*:

> It is all writing, and a really good actor understands that. Good acting is Not Messing Up Good Words. If you can release the potential of the words . . . . The best thing is to recognize a good script and then serve it…There is a lot to be said for good acting, but most actors will mess up good words. I'm not saying that acting's not valuable, and good acting is not rare—it is. But good acting is serving good words. It's releasing their power.

There is no question that James Marsters was "serving the words" but, in "playing more soul than is written," he did much more, he enhanced them. He was "releasing their potential" as he spoke them, but he also marked out a performance space in which he extended the emotional range of that "power." Through his technically nuanced performance, Marsters won over the viewers, the story, the story's creators and, as a result, Spike earned

Buffy's love. In "Lie To Me," Buffy complains to Giles: "Nothing's ever simple anymore. I'm constantly trying to work it out. Who to love or hate. Who to trust. It's just, like, the more I know, the more confused I get. Does it ever get easy?" It takes a long time for Buffy to figure out Spike enough to declare her love for him, but then she does not see as much of him as the audience does. The viewers are probably paying more attention to Marsters' performance of Spike's soul emerging from a monster who, in spite of where he started, and against all the odds, overcame a pre-determined demonic destiny and chose to redeem himself.

Notes

[1] One exception is an unpublished conference paper which uses Gibson's view in an analysis of 'charisma' as an element in Mr Marsters' performance by Sue Turnbull.

[2] I might add that this was a question suggested to me by female fans who had identified with Spike rather than Buffy, despite the storyline being, ostensibly, one of female empowerment.

[3] Spike is referring to Buffy but some fans took it as a comment from the writer on the positive views of the character held by the audience.

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