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# *The Comic Anti-hero in* Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or Silly Villain: Spike is for Kicks*

(1) Seldom in literature or entertainment does a villain cross over to the heroic side. Some heroes, to be sure, such as The Shadow, have villainous pasts, yet we encounter them already on the road to personal redemption by the doing of good deeds; rarely do we catch them while they are still villains, and rarely do we see the epiphanies that send them toward good and away from evil. Still more rarely does any villain, redeemable or damned, become an object of sport. Even comedy's villains often play a straight, often sobering role of wickedness, balancing the laughter with realistic reflection. The television program *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has had its share of deadly serious villains, none more so than Spike, or William the Bloody. A figure of modern amorality and random evil, he has, however, by degrees, become a figure of fun, a buffoon, and is now becoming a comic hero—or anti-hero. Spike, once very villainous indeed, is now laughable, but not irredeemable, and that is the basis of his peculiar transformation. To be redeemed, Spike had to be made a comic figure; how he got there—and where he might be going—is the focus of this paper.

(2) Within the ritual cycle of comedy, which encompasses disorder, initiation, struggle, sacrifice, death, rebirth, and union, the central figure of the comic hero has certain qualities, identified by Wylie Sypher in his "Appendix" to the essay collection, *Comedy* (193-255). The comic hero, far more complex than would seem at first glance, can function either as a savior figure—called the eiron—or as an intruder—called the alazon. As the eiron he often conveys wisdom underneath a clownish exterior; as the alazon, he often disrupts the status quo and profanes what is sacred. The eiron always has a sacrifice to make—sometimes even of himself—for the unity of the society; as the intruder, he is thrown out of society for the same reasons. Paradoxically, a comic hero can embody both types, can be both intruder and savior—witness Alceste in Moliere's *The Misanthrope*. Either as savior or intruder, the comic hero is always something of an outcast, different from others, set apart; however sympathetically he may be viewed there is always a laughable quality in the comic hero which keeps him distanced from others. The vampire Spike on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is just such a character. As the horror comedy of the program has darkened into more somber tones, Spike's role as a comic hero has brightened that landscape, and necessarily so for the unity of the society and the text.

(3) The comic horror of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* early on proved a perfect venue for a vampire slayer with a sense of humor, even when she was confronted with the most evil of evil-doers. For a while the pungent punning and "whatever" philosophy of the Slayer and her friends monopolized the laughs generated; seldom did the villains—The Master, minion vampires, bug-people, or hyena teens—generate their own clever linguistic jibes, although they were often the targets of them, making for some memorable comedy. Overall Buffy's nemeses played it straight up (the way she claims she likes her evil). Just as she has begun to get a handle on living on the Hellmouth, that sense of order is again disrupted by the arrival of a disorder deadlier than any she has faced yet: Spike.

(4) Spike, also known as William the Bloody, enters Buffy's world in a way which immediately declares him a new form of evil, a vampire with a comic soul. Spike's evil dances in happy contemplation of itself, as might a joyous and wicked Puck delighting in confusion and destruction. In Season Two's "School Hard" (2003) he arrives in Sunnydale in a 1957 DeSoto with blacked-out windows establishing his mobility beyond that of usually sun-shy vampires: by night they might flee the Slayer in a car, but by day, it's strictly sewer-walks for them. Spike's arrival in a vehicle modified to extend his undead mobility to all hours tells us that, unlike The Master and his kin, Spike will have very few limitations indeed.

(5) Spike's initial utterance of "Home sweet home" as he strikes up a cigarette at Sunnydale's town limits welcome sign, having first run over it in his car; his punk rock looks, his wise-guy observations as sharp as Buffy's Mr. Pointy, all give us a sense of his modernity—and thus his deadly ability to blend in with the Generation Next populace he will combat. He could hang at the Bronze without a second glance from the unsuspecting patrons—and does so later, becoming overly and laughably fond of their fried "blooming" onion. His sardonic one-liners and blasé posturing establish him as dangerously close to Buffy and her evil-fighters, the so-called Slayerettes or Scooby Gang.

(6) As Spike comes closer and closer to the Scoobies he proves himself an able ironicist. Early on, in an intruder's gesture of profaning the sacred, he easily dispatches into sunlight The Master's successor, the Anointed One, whom he calls the Annoying One [“School Hard,” 2003]. Having thus become the vampire numero uno of Sunnydale, amid the trailing smoke of the boy's demise he turns to Drusilla and says, “Let's see what's on t.v.” Even in his most vicious acts he is casually humorous, matching the Slayer not only blow for blow but wit for wit. Strangely, he is also, we discover, a romantic, maintaining a long-term relationship with Drusilla that is suspiciously human in its expressions. In "Surprise" (2013), when the duo call forth The Judge—a.k.a. Big Blue—they are confronted by the fact of their decidedly caring bond: the Judge, who can detect the least whiff of humanity the better to eradicate it, threatens them, saying they "stink of humanity.” Such love is not politically correct in demon society, and they have a few tense moments convincing the Judge that they are really very demonic, despite this seeming flaw.

(7) And we have our first uneasy moments as well, as our standard order of vampire lore and rule is disordered; if a vampire, like Spike, can be solicitous of his lover, then it means he still has some humanity within. While we may shrug and say "Nah, he's evil," in a Slayersque dismissal, the impression stays with us, that, though supposedly soulless, there's something soulful in this character.

(8) His successful attempt to reinvigorate Dru in “What's My Line” (2010) results, unfortunately, in Spike's diminished power, reduced to wheelchair mobility only. The newly-demonized Angel contemptuously calls him "Sit and Spin,” casting aspersions on his potency in all areas, and we feel a peculiar sympathy for Spike even as we laugh at him. Still, we know he is full of tricks and won't be confined forever. In "I Only Have Eyes for You" (2019) we learn he has actually fooled the more villainous Dru and Angel, hiding his recovery by playing the fool indeed. We see the full display of Spike's contradictory personality when, loathing Angel and the renewal of the older bond Angel has with Drusilla, he allies himself with the Slayer in defeating the plans of the other two to destroy the world. In revealing that he is jealous of Angel and wants Drusilla back as completely and only his, he also admits that he likes the world as it is—with “Billions of people walking around like Happy Meals with legs”--and wants no apocalyptic end to it. Granted, his desire is self-serving and disturbing, but his preference for the status quo, his love for Drusilla, and his willingness to ally with the enemy of vampires everywhere to maintain both shows us yet more evidence that this vampire is atypical, more human, perhaps, than we care to admit. As Angel is sent to hell and Spike rides out of Sunnydale with an abducted Dru, we wonder just where this idiosyncratic way will lead him—and us. To turn against evil and side with good even for a mix of reasons not themselves good nor interested in the promotion of good is still a profound action for the vampire Spike—and for the Slayer and the Scooby Gang. Spike has released himself from his old order, and enters into more and more chaos of self—with comic results. Thus begins a strange off-on alliance with the the Scooby Gang, leading Spike away from the deadly villain he was toward a reduction of his villainous power, toward buffoonery, and finally toward his eventual rise to hero status.

(9) Spike returns—we knew he could not stay away for long—in "Lovers Walk" (3008) in Season Three, and what a changed vampire he is, having gone through his own kind of hell. Drusilla, not grateful for his villainous dereliction in the destruction of the world plot, has rejected him for a chaos demon. Much later in the series we learn her real reasons; as it is, what we see of Spike in “Lovers Walk” is at least enough to convince us that Spike is a very human vampire, and not a little ridiculous in his teary-eyed, angry dejection. It may seem at first a sudden reversal in behavior when he sits at Joyce's kitchen table, bitching and moaning about Dru, like a scene out of one of the soap operas he likes to watch, but in fact we have been prepared, slowly, for this new, lamenting and lamentable Spike. From his first arrival in Sunnydale he has belonged to the ironists linguistically and behaviorally; after his attempt to revamp Dru results in his seeming impotence, his *real* impotence as the third wheel in the vampire power base (his only weapon his sarcasm) has set him up for a continuing role as something less than demonic and something decidedly comic. Though his betrayal of Angel then and his later, and frequent, changes in direction against the Scooby Gang remind us of the fiendish delight he takes in causing chaos, he has been inevitably changed. He has become vulnerable. A maudlin Spike, confessing his woman troubles to Joyce, of all people, over a cup of coffee, a goofy-faced Spike, mocking the vampire threat he poses to Joyce behind her back, relishing the alarm he causes the good-again Angel, is a Spike not so far, after all, from the wise guy who first called Sunnydale home.

(10) Spike's position does represent a serious degradation of his vampire power; in a candid lecture to unrequited lovers Angel and Buffy, he reveals a lover's wisdom and weakness and makes no apologies. When he vows he'll hunt Drusilla down, tie her up and torture her until she comes round to loving him again, the evil inherent in his plan is deflated by his laughable, lovelorn demeanor. To seek to give love by torture should make us recoil from him, but we laugh and like him all the more. The reality of Spike's capacity for evil has been undermined by his capacity for emotion. There is nothing to do but laugh and hope the poor fellow finds someone to love... and torture.

(11) Somehow, as he barrels off, having atypically aided the Slayer in her fight against evil, a punk rock storm "I Did It My Way" playing on his car radio, we know we still have not seen the last of him. And we have not: in Season Four's "The Harsh Light of Day,"," a crossover story-line from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *Angel*, Spike seeks a legendary ring that can grant him a limitless walk in the sun—unburned though a vampire. Empowered by possession of the Gem of Amarra, he is still defeated in broad daylight by the Slayer, and the ring taken from him; he goes to Los Angeles to get the ring back [on the following episode of *Angel* ("I Will Remember You," 1008], and we see the curious mixture he has become. Although he opens the episode by lightheartedly mocking, in a memorable impersonation, Angel's stock-in-trade pretty-boy broodiness, he is soon once again the cruel Spike, amused by Angel's torture, determined to get the ring which will enable him to walk freely among humans. However, at the end, deprived of the ring, crossed up and defeated by his own villainy, the last we see of him is in a role like that of the Trix cereal rabbit: a victim of almost vaudevillian slapstick, he rages impotently at his enemies, then is hit on the head by a falling brick, and utters a loud, comical "Ow!" Like a cartoon character he suffers but not too realistically, and we laugh. Despite the fact that he has just engaged in utterly despicable acts we are also moved to say "Poor Spike" in amusement.

(12) Poor Spike's travails deepen back in Sunnydale in "The Initiative" (4007); we wonder what draws him ever back to the scene of his humiliations, though ostensibly he seeks to prove his vampire prowess—and what better way to do so than by killing another Slayer? While observing Buffy from the shadows and giving voice to menacing musings, he is cut off in mid-monologue by the Initiative's hunters, who net him, electro-shock him, and drag him off, reducing him, as we see later, to the nadir of vampiric existence: caged, fed doctored blood, and destined for experimental vivisection. We want Spike to get free from this hell and its demons, and he does. However, his growing impotence via Dru's rejection, his failure to kill the Slayer, his inability to vanquish his rival Angel, and his growing humanity have been made manifest by the micro-chip control implanted by the Initiative. In "Pangs" (4008), Willow's explanation to the others that "he couldn't perform" his vampiric acts upon her, is not only a clever sexual innuendo but a real reference to his total deterioration as a vampire. He shows up begging for help at Giles' door, the antithesis of everything he has been, explaining that "Spike had a little trip to vet, and now he doesn't chase the other puppies anymore." For his pathetic state he garners sarcasm-laden, often physical reproaches from the others. Stymied by the technology in his head, his vampirism effectively neutered, Spike's only weapon is his mouth—and he doesn't hesitate to use it even if it then gets slapped shut. We fully realize his new comic buffoon status as he sits, tied up, in the midst of the war between the Shumash spirit warriors and the Scoobies; arrows finding their marks in him, he becomes a cartoonish pincushion for the real slings and arrows of his outrageous fortunes.

(13) From here Spike's transition to comic buffoon, and comic hero, begins. He has been an intruder, a profaner of his own culture and that of the humans; in the subsequent disorder, he has become, paradoxically, the initiate—courtesy of The Initiative—into rites of discovery, the one who must undertake a struggle for the good of all. Of course this is with great comic effect, as, after all, what's a vampire to do if he cannot "perform"? When he discovers he can at least fight demons if not humans, he is ecstatic, becoming an enthusiastic member of the Scooby Gang, much to their unease. In "Doomed," Spike's comic struggle with this new self is fully displayed in his fruitless attempts at suicide—grimly comic in their way—and the subsequent reactions of the others to his attempts. Willow's comment that they just can't let him "dust" himself because "we know him" is truer than she or they or Spike can imagine. They have always known him, he has always been one of "them" even when at his most evil, so close to their generation that all that keeps them separate is his taste for blood and wickedness. Severely limited Spike has had to find new direction; from his involuntary sacrifice via the Initiative's chip to this voluntary sacrifice in which he gives up the demon community to which he belongs to be a Scooby, it is no surprise that he becomes the gang's comic relief. In an increasingly complex and ambiguous text, the world of Buffy has smudged the sharp delineation between good and evil. In this new dynamic that seeks to overthrow the old, we—and Buffy and her gang—are caught in an unresolvable tension about the nature of evil: this strained vision needs a focal point, one at which we can laugh to release our unease. If you name the monsters under the bed, they become pets. Thus cometh Spike the buffoon. If we can laugh at evil, yet be sympathetic towards whatever humanity may remain in it, the threat of being overwhelmed by it is reduced, and we—and the evil-doers themselves—may just be redeemed from our weaknesses. Examined, studied and owned as part of us, Spike, in moving from villain to cartoonish villain to comic sidekick, fulfills a necessary role and

one that must necessarily evolve toward more inclusion—toward heroism. Spike takes the falls, the pies in the face, because he must. It is not without a struggle.

(14) Late in Season Four, in “The Yoko Factor” (4020), he does rebel, reverting to a more overtly antagonistic role in teaming with the child of demon science, Adam; but Spike's mischief is largely just that, an impotent churning in frustration at being neither demon nor human, neither fit for real villainy nor acceptable for heroism in the group. His dependence on Adam to remove the chip from his head comes to naught; another abortive attempt leaves him even more frustrated. Previously, his siding with the Scoobies, for his own selfish reasons, has made him a permanent outcast in polite and impolite demon society. The comic hero is always an outcast and outsider, and Spike is truly a man in no man's land, at home nowhere.

(15) In Season Five’s “Fool for Love” (5007) we finally get a view of the man he once was: William the Bloody *Poet*, writing sentimental verses to a woman who will not have him, who laughs at the jokes told about him; when one scornful fellow says that people would rather be impaled on railroad spikes than listen to his dreadful verses, it poses a contradiction of Watcher lore, which has ascribed his adjectival name to his viciousness and attributed his nickname to his *torturing* his victims with railroad spikes; in this disjunction, we suddenly see vampire Spike as, possibly, a legend in his own mind. What we see in pre-vampiric William is a sensitive, almost moppet-eyed fellow, who comes to vampirism seeking validity of his manhood, and instead takes a hundred year path away from his humanity, only to return to it in Sunnydale, again and again.

(16) After the collapse of the Initiative and Adam's plot to rule, Spike lingers in the Slayer’s town, in his sad little crypt, watching soap operas and quarreling with the laughably dumb Harmony in a sort of weird Burns and Allen of the tomb set. He serves as informant to Giles for money for blood; Buffy also periodically seeks him out to gain information for which he is paid in body blows, still functioning as the butt of the comic mode. In “Out of My Head,” after helping Buffy in her slayage—and sowing some dissension between Buffy and her boyfriend Riley—and being left thankless for his effort, he growls to himself in a menacing graveyard monologue, “I will know your blood, Slayer. I will make your neck my chalice and I will drink deep.” He then turns to stalk off and falls into an open grave, his affronted “Ow!” echoing among the tombstones. Seemingly there is no place for him to go but down .

(17) However, the comic hero does have a direction—and so does Spike; it emerges from his passion for Buffy, which comes out of their essential bond. In “Fool for Love,” he elucidates this clearly when he tells her they both need death, both seek it, both long to embrace it. However, in a flashback scene, we are given to understand that, at least for Spike, it is also Buffy herself that he needs and longs to embrace: Drusilla rejected Spike for the chaos demon because she detected Spike’s deeper bond with the Slayer, one that reached beyond his initial desire to have saved the world for his vampiric convenience. Drusilla tells him, “I can still see her, floating all around you. Why won’t you push her away?” He has not been able to push her away because Spike is Buffy's shadow self;[1] their bonding , played out in several "false" weddings—Willow's wishes gone wrong in “Something Blue,” Harmony's hysterically funny Slayer-role playing to satisfy Spike's sexual longing, the regrettable creation of the Buffy robot—all promise a union that cannot be, at least not yet. When Buffy’s rejection of Spike --she tells him “you’re beneath me”-- echoes the words of his long-ago human love's rejection, he is stunned; later, he declares she’ll be “six bloody feet beneath *me”* and goes to kill Buffy—even if it causes him Initiative-chip pain, even death. However, this determination is easily overturned by his growing humanity when he sees her in distress over her mother's illness. Moreover, his watching over Dawn, telling her tales of his evil deeds as if they are fairy tales—and charmingly altering the endings when Buffy overhears to depict a charitable, good Spike—and his continued assistance to the Scoobies when trouble brews, also guide him into re-humanization, a redeeming of the self . The comic form requires a union at its conclusion, yet in these abortive, false unions we still see the comic anti-hero moving himself toward a real unification of self. His attachment to Buffy—seemingly impossible in a creature without a soul, even with a micro-chip to constrain his bloodthirsty urges—serves to guide him toward a soul, involuntarily or not; as Dawn points out in “Crush” (5014), soul or “chip in the head—same diff." And he knows it; upon trying to win back Drusilla, he has heard it from her: “You taste like ashes” she tells him in the “Fool for Love” flashback. The vampire self has been figuratively reduced to ash, “dusted “ from within, but it takes Spike a good while to come out of denial, and admit that he has changed.

(18) Spike cannot achieve that self-knowledge, that rebirth, fully until the last greatest bond with what he was, has been sacrificed; in " Crush" his rejection of Drusilla, who made him a vampire, is the death necessary for his renewal. Although his willingness to kill her out of desire for Buffy does not convince the Slayer he has changed, it convinces Harmony and Dru—and Spike himself—that he really is no longer part of the demon society. He has chosen humanity over vampirism, despite all his trickery, inconstancy, and wild swings into downright evil machinations. In the long-running battle with Glory, the Scoobies eventually come to acknowledge his usefulness; even Giles points out that he is a most valuable player due to, paradoxically, his vampiric strength. Buffy reluctantly admits he is necessary to the cause, after grudgingly dismissing his faux pas over using her image to create a sex toy, and allows for his assistance in the crusade. Spike sincerely tells her that " I know you'll never love me; I know I'm a monster, but you treat me like a man," and for that he is grateful . This is what is most important to Spike—not being treated like a vampire, which is what the undead should desire. Being a man—being human—is his goal, whether he has fully accepted that or not. Spike has expelled his vampire nature as the intruder, has sacrificed that self to save his soul and recreate the unity of the community ,as evil becomes good. Bless his little black heart.

**Works Cited**

Sypher, Wylie. "Appendix." *Comedy*. 1956; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1980.

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[1] Editors' note: see Delores J. Nurss, "Spike as Shadow." 2001. http://www.ficbitch.com/fistsandfangs/spikeasshadow.html.