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"YOU SAY TOMATO"
Englishness in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

After finally managing to have *Lolita* published, Vladimir Nabokov had to confront the various criticisms and concerns regarding his novel. Apart from the obvious attacks against its supposed immorality, Nabokov also had to contend with a range of interpretations that, for the great exponent of subtlety and care, seemed to be reductive and simplifying in the extreme. Among these was included a reading that tended to see the figure of Humbert as representative of Old Europe and which read *Lolita* herself as synecdochic of America. Thus the novel becomes a tale of brash, crude, young America being debauched by the sophisticated but depraved and perverse Europe (Nabokov, "On a book entitled *Lolita*" 314). While there may be some critical interest in this reading, on its own it inevitably serves to reduce this colossally self-conscious, allusive, intelligent and moving work to the level of a rather blunt allegory. By only allowing the characters to act in one fashion, here as the ciphers of an allegorical puzzle, the text loses much of its multiplicity and also the thematic, sympathetic and inter-personal resonances it should be allowed.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is not, of course, *Lolita*. Ignoring for the moment the clear generic differences between them it does seem to me that there are some interesting points of contact that can usefully be borne in mind when considering *Buffy*. The main aspect for the purposes of this essay is that, while there is an allegorical element to the relationship between Buffy and her friends who are all young Americans, and Mr. Giles and Spike who are older English men, I do not wish this reading to imply that I am diminishing the programme's manifold subtleties and complexities. Less important to the current argument, but interesting in their own right, are the ways in which the

two texts do draw on a young girl's relationship with a father figure (step-father in *Lolita's* case; substitute father-figure in *Buffy's*); the texts' self-conscious attempts to subvert generic expectations (Nabokov pastiching both the detective story and the psychological confessional, Joss Whedon undermining conventions of horror specifically but notions of the hero generally); the range of inter-textual and allusive elements of both; and the element of humour in contexts that may initially appear less than conducive to comedy. Finally, I am insisting on the relationship in order to assert through comparison that *Buffy* is a serious piece of popular art that is deserving of serious academic study.

One of the reasons for *Buffy's* inclusion as a serious piece of art is also perhaps a reason why its inclusion in this special edition on American sitcoms may appear confusing. Whatever else it may be, *Buffy* is not obviously a sitcom. It would more usually be thought of as a horror show, yet it is also a teen drama which has at times as well been a silent movie, a musical, a surreal dreamscape in addition to being a comedy. In its best episodes it has been combinations of nearly all of these.

Buffy then is a great example of American situation comedy within the context of a generically fluid programme. Joss Whedon, the show's creator, Executive Producer, some-time writer and director was clear in his desire that the programme from the outset upset expectations concerning its presumed status as a teen-horror show. In the opening sequence of "Welcome to the Hellmouth" the very first episode of the first season, a young blonde high-school girl and what appears to be her boyfriend break into Sunnydale High. There are a number of assumptions that watchers of both horror and teen shows will have. First, they are there to "make out"; second, as the girl keeps referring to strange noises, something bad is going to happen; third, the something bad will happen to the girl; fourth, it is likely that the boy might be the one who does the something bad. In the event, the girl turns round to camera and her face has transformed into that of a vampire and she kills the boy. Joss Whedon asserts that this was the show's "mission statement," that he was hoping to engage in "genre-busting" (DVD audio commentary to *Buffy* 1.1) and that from this point on audiences would have to be prepared for unusual, anti-generic events. This extends as far as the show's theme-tune which opens with a powerful chord from an organ, akin to Hammer Horrors, but very quickly segues into contemporary indie pop. Once again, the show is refusing to be simply a horror show and is also indicating that its main characters may not be what one may expect.

The girl-vampire opening not only has the effect of producing surprise but also acts as a template for one of the ways in which the programme works

with humour. In addition to very witty dialogue which I shall come to, and other forms of physical comedy, much of the show's comedic value derives precisely from the situations in which the characters find themselves. It is not then, simply, that the situation allows the characters to perform funny acts or say amusing things, but more interestingly, that the situation is often in a position of generic tension with what is happening. By placing two sets of generic codes side by side, or by juxtaposing one set of generic expectations in one scene with a different set in the next scene, much of the humour is predicated on structural incongruity as much as it is on character interaction or dialogue. A brief and early example of this occurs in "Welcome to the Hellmouth." Buffy has spotted a vampire who is looking to attack her friend Willow. She is looking for the vampire in a dark and eerie nightclub. The camera tracks her in close shot, shadows are cast long from the lighting, Buffy opens a door, there is nothing there, the music builds, she passes us, close to camera, we track the back of her head and see the shadow of person or thing, Buffy turns and grabs the monster. It is Cordelia Chase, just another girl at the school whose first response is "Geez, what *is* your childhood trauma" and follows this up with a remark to her three friends, "I have to call everyone I have ever met, right now" (*Buffy* 1.1). The comedy here derives from the rapid shift from a scene from a horror movie (replete with all the production requirements of this—lighting, music, camera angles and so forth, as well as the situation that has been set up) to a scene from a farce where the mistaken identity motif is augmented by the callous and witty one-liners from Cordelia (who is now framed in a portrait shot with more light and different music).

This juxtaposing of different genres as a mechanism of comedic possibility (among other things) is mirrored in the programme's characters and story by a number of other juxtapositions that enable not only the comedy but also the action, the suspense and the drama both in terms of plot development and character interaction. The dominant juxtaposition is probably that between human and non human, natural and supernatural. Also though, there are the juxtapositions and collisions between male and female (which accommodates the human and non-human when characters develop powers or have relations with non-humans: the question of Buffy's humanness is a central and on-going cause of debate, contention and concern in the programme); questions of youth and age, responsibility and rights, right and wrong and, of most prescient in the current context, America and Britain.

Buffy, as the Vampire Slayer, has a Watcher to guide, train and look after her. Her Watcher is Rupert Giles, who is also the librarian at Sunnydale High. He is in his 40s and British. Our first introduction to him is in the library with Buffy coming in to find some books. She is oblivious to the fact that he is the

Watcher. Interestingly, she is coming from her lesson which has been on the Black Death. While the first season revolves around the resurrection of the Master and his desire to wipe humanity off the face of the earth, the reference to the Black Death immediately raises a European dimension to the programme and a depth of history which is essential insofar as the vampire myth is a predominantly European one. Buffy sees the librarian in his tweed jacket, his glasses and his slightly gauche poise and he surprises her, and us, by knowing who she is: “Miss Summers?” (*Buffy* 1.1). The accent is clearly English, quite upper and the formal exchange identifies him as a quintessential Englishman in terms of discursive expectations derived from other horror shows and cinematic representations. However, he is also a handsome man and one, about whom we quickly discover, there is significantly more than parody and exposition.

Not only is he English, though; he is old enough to be Buffy’s father. To this extent, the programme at least allows, if it doesn’t actively encourage, a reading of the relationship between Buffy and Giles (as we come to know him) as one between Watcher and Slayer, between teacher and student, between father and daughter and between Old England and the New World in a fashion not dissimilar to that seen by some critics of *Lolita*. The father-daughter relationship is quickly posited when Buffy rejects her position as Slayer and Giles reprimands her in a very fatherly fashion, exclaiming, “I really don’t understand this attitude” (*Buffy* 1.1). Later, in the nightclub where he has gone searching for her, just before the incident with Cordelia Chase, Giles’s Britishness and age are highlighted. Amid a discussion about vampires, Giles laments the noise of the club and asserts that he would “much rather be at home with a cup of Bovril and a good book” (*Buffy* 1.1). The culture-specific reference to Bovril and the desire for quiet serve to reinforce his position as older and English. Buffy’s response a little later that he is like a “textbook with arms” heightens his position as authority and teacher. Giles himself is painfully aware of these attributes. As the series progresses his relationship with Buffy becomes very close and fatherly, and she responds in kind. He also is seen to be a much richer and more rounded character than we may at first imagine. He has been, in his younger days, involved in the death of a friend, has been in bands, has his own love-life and so on. Initially however, he and we are forced to recognise that his injunction to Willow to “wrest some information from that dread machine...was a bit, er, British, wasn’t it?” (*Buffy* 1.2).

Giles’s Britishness (which is, of course, Englishness, itself perhaps a conflation which marks a certain attitude to and distance from Britain on behalf of the makers or viewers of the show in the U.S.) is provided with interesting tonal comparisons from other English characters on the show. One of

these is another Watcher, Wesley Wyndham Price, who arrives in the third season after Giles has been relieved of duty by the Watchers' Council. The other is a vampire named Spike. Wesley provides a comparison in kind. He too is a Watcher; he too is upper and smartly dressed, often in tweeds, but he is a much more effete version of the type. If Giles might be thought in some ways to reflect and trade upon a sort of self-controlled, stiff-upper-lip spirit of Empire avuncular Victorian version of Englishness, then Wesley is much more closely allied to a bumbling, cowardly, effeminate *Brideshead Revisited* Edwardian sort of character. The interaction between the two provides a great source of humour for the programme and also presents a surprisingly variegated version of Englishness to be articulated.

The entry of Wesley opens up its own situation comedy possibilities. The Watcher-Slayer, father-daughter partnership has been forcibly split by an external and distanced institution whose representative is bound to be resented. The bonds between Buffy and Giles are stronger than the impositions from the Council and, into this mixture one must also add the anomalous new Slayer, Faith, who was called after the brief death of Buffy (the strains on credibility that the story-lines throw up are often a starting point for the writers in their own self-referential jibes). Wesley is first seen wearing tweed, a tie and glasses much like Giles at his entrance and also much like Giles in this scene. At one point, after a small row, both Giles and Wesley, unseen by the other, simultaneously take off their glasses, wipe them with a handkerchief taken from a top pocket, and replace the glasses in identical fashion. These two, then, share a scene that mocks and draws parallels, but which has been at pains to highlight differences, not least among which is the fact that Wesley is about ten years younger.

Wesley is, initially, patronising, overbearing, rule-bound and very proper. He laments the emotional attachments between Giles and Buffy and criticises Giles's methods. The avuncular Giles comes up against the repressed head boy, a self-definition given much later in the spin-off series *Angel* in an episode of almost pure comedy called "Spin the Bottle." Inevitably, Wesley is going to have to face his failings and later in the episode he and Giles are captured by the henchmen of a demon called Balthazar. Earlier Wesley had chastised Buffy's language use by saying, "Her abuse of the English language is such that I understand only every other word in a sentence" (*Buffy* 3.14). This typically English response to American English is compounded by his use of very quaint British English expressions, like "Don't fret" (*Buffy* 3.14). After capture by the henchmen Wesley's language remains very "British" and his cowardly attempt to strike a deal with Balthazar expresses another aspect of a perception of Englishness that Wesley has already demonstrated, his effemi-

nacy. He semi-moans “Oh God, oh God, oh God, stay calm Mr. Giles” (*Buffy* 3.14) thereby being both afraid and proper at the same time. Giles maintains the calm poise of the gentleman as well as his verbal sharpness and ironic capacity, “Thank God you’re here, I was planning to panic” (*Buffy* 3.14). Wesley’s spectacularly underscored “No need to get snippy” presents him as thoroughly English but also immature and boy-like while Giles’s “Be quiet you twerp” (*Buffy* 3.14) insists on his superiority in both moral charge and age by reducing Wesley to the position of child—“twerp” being a phrase of the mildest sort of chastisement, its use here is clearly an emphatic belittling of Wesley.

The entire situation is a comic re-statement of the western or mafia movie where the good-guys are captured and threatened by the forces of evil. The coward and the hero is evidently a stock scenario and is deployed by the scriptwriters for all that it is worth. What is interesting here is that the opportunity has been taken to play off two quite similar versions of Englishness in a context that lightly allows an expression of conviviality and contempt: the English are both stalwart and cowardly; elegant and gauche; powerful and weak; admirable and contemptible. In addition, the situation requires that they try and escape whereas each, in different ways, is too concerned with asserting their Englishness as “real” or most worthy.

Giles in the “dread machine” episode mentioned earlier has self-consciously realised his position as alien, a recognition that has prompted the affectionate response “Welcome to the New World” (*Buffy* 1.2). Wesley, just arrived from Britain holds the notion of the New World as something that America still is. He describes Balthazar as being “brought [...] to the New World” (*Buffy* 3.14). He appears to be unable to distance himself from a notion of England as superior to the United States. Giles, for all his “old world” ways, and reluctance to use computers and so on, is much more modern than Wesley. To this extent there is a version of Englishness in terms of attitude that is being commended in the programme and one that is clearly to be mocked. Both however belong to a rather idealised notion of the English gentleman-scholar in a style not very far removed from, for example, Captain Jean-Luc Picard in the series *The Next Generation* who, for all his ancestry might be French is still the Victorian English gentleman.

The other main Englishman to be in Buffy’s view is Spike. He is introduced in the second season as the main source of evil with his English, mad vampire girlfriend Drusilla. Absent from the third season, with one guest appearance, he is a regular throughout the next seasons. In these he is reduced as a threat via a number of plot mechanisms, but his potency as a character remains. This is largely due to the particular sort of Englishness he portrays.

With Drusilla, his entrance is reminiscent of Sid Vicious, the musician with the 1970s punk band the Sex Pistols and his girlfriend, Nancy, who scandalised the British media with their anti-social behaviour, drug taking, violence and eventual suicide.

Spike, then, offers a version of reasonably recent Englishness as exemplified through youth culture. This finds its expression in sub-cultural musical forms (mods and rockers, glam, punk, new wave, indie and dance in a rough timeline from the 1960s to the present), as well as in the related fashions, or anti-fashions, and of course in forms of violence, most usually associated with football (soccer). This last point is reinforced in one of the episodes where Xander Harris, on returning to the scene of a demonic attack, wryly asks “Who sponsored careers day, the British Soccer Fan Association?” (*Buffy* 2.10).

There is, between Spike and Giles, a cultural and historical gap. Giles is an image of Englishness that owes its status to cultural representations from the Victorian period through to Second World War films and up to icons such as James Bond. He is intelligent, well-mannered, courageous but not unduly violent, thoughtful and witty. Spike owes his Englishness to violent counter-culture, to anti-heroes, anti-establishment values and a certain brutality. Curiously, Spike begins life as a late nineteenth-century member of precisely the class that Giles seems to draw some of his representational power from. Spike, then called William, is a softly spoken, rather effete poet. His poetry is so bad he is dubbed William the Bloody Awful. After he becomes a vampire, he is William the Bloody as a consequence of the appalling violence and tortures he instils. The similarity of nicknames neatly conjoins these two seemingly opposed representations of Englishness in the one epithet.

As with the resemblance between Giles and Wesley, the programme insists on representational similarities between Spike and Giles. The most noticeable of these occurs in the final episode of the fourth season, “Restless.” Having vanquished the evil, Buffy and her friends are relaxing watching videos. They all fall asleep and dream a variety of surreal events which seem to have physically damaging properties. Buffy’s dream includes a sequence where Spike and Giles are both dressed in tweed, Spike with a particularly fetching deer-stalker hat, and they are sitting side by side on a set of swings. They look very similar, engage in the same activity of childhood innocence and Giles asserts Spike as his son and potentially a Watcher of sorts.

This small episode is reprised two seasons later in an episode called “Tabula Rasa.” A small amount of scene setting will be necessary so as to demonstrate the ways in which the episode works with tonal and generic juxtaposition in order for the full humour and pathos to be evident, especially in its portrayal of Englishness. Willow and her girlfriend Tara have fallen out be-

cause of the amount of magic that Willow has been using. This draws on love story, teen romance and fantasy. Giles has told Buffy that he must leave Sunnydale and return to England. This is after Buffy has had the trauma of being killed, sent to Heaven and then ripped out of Heaven by Willow and Xander who mistakenly believe she is in Hell. Buffy feels lost and, now, betrayed by Giles. This draws on fantasy and family drama. Both of these issues and the ways they are played lead to genuine emotional turmoil and an engagement with the viewer at this level. Spike and Buffy have been drawn into a physical relationship that has confused Buffy (he is a vampire, after all) and at the beginning of the episode Spike's negative characteristics are compounded by the fact that he owes a demon kittens from a betting debt. Seeking refuge from the demon's men, Spike runs to The Magic Box where all have gathered for Giles to tell them of his decision to return to England. To avoid being burned by the sun, Spike has borrowed a tweed suit and deer-stalker hat just like that from Buffy's dream. This is clearly blackly funny in the context of a potentially damaging relationship for an already damaged Buffy. Willow wants to make everyone forget their bad experiences and so casts a spell which comes into operation at the precise point that Buffy is making a speech of farewell and pain.

Up to this point, the episode has been a relationship-led story which has been, at best, downbeat and that tends towards the tragic. The spell makes everyone pass out and when they awake the spell has proven too powerful and they have all lost their memories entirely. We have seen small moments of Giles's Englishness (repeating Buffy's angry injunction to "cut to the chase" with a sense of sadness and disdain), and Spike has twice used the word "bloke" in reference to the demon (unless otherwise stated, all subsequent quotations are from *Buffy* 6.8). Once they awake from the spell the camera shows Giles lying slumped against Anya (who is engaged to Xander) and he re-arranges his glasses and wipes some drool from Anya's back. The motifs of his Englishness and age are here already being deployed as comic tools. Spike, who was sitting on the cash counter, wakes and falls off with a high-pitched squeak. His violent, punk Englishness is mocked both through his ridiculous costume and his frightened yelp; in fact he is much more William the Bloody Awful poet at this moment.

Giles's role as guide is briefly asserted when he tries to comfort Xander who is very scared and to explain the situation which, he reasons, is probably the result of having got "terribly drunk": the old-fashioned adverb indicating once more his distance both in terms of cultural expectation and age. Anya mentions a pop-culture American star, which simply baffles Giles. Having ascertained that they are in a magic shop, Giles, the grand exponent of magics

and the one-time member of the Watchers" Council declares that magic is all "balderdash and chicanery." Again, his Englishness is manifest through his lexical choice and this is presented as sceptical, patronising and aloof. The aloofness is also expressed through understated self-irony when he states, "We don't know a bloody thing except I seem to be British, don't I? With glasses. Well, that narrows it down significantly." The great expositor and source of knowledge becomes little more than a teller of the obvious and unwitting expression of his own stereotype.

Spike, having recovered something of his punk air, attempts to mock Giles through recourse to a further stereotyped vision of Englishness. He says, "Oh, listen to *Mary Poppins*." Apart from the clear cultural reference to Englishness and an implied feminisation, this is also amusing for long-time *Buffy* fans to the extent that many people have criticised the actor who plays Spike, James Marsters, for his accent sounding a little too much like Dick van Dyke from the film *Mary Poppins*. The show here is managing to present and subvert stereotypes of Englishness by drawing attention to its own implicit collusion with some of them. Spike continues (all the while in his tweeds and deer-stalker and English accent), "He's got his crust all stiffened up with that nancy boy accent" once again asserting a sense of English masculinity as effete, an assertion made against him in his William days. Carrying on, he says, "You Englishmen are always so..." which is intended to be the precursor to a racial slur but which is abruptly halted as he realises his own voice: "bloody hell: sodding, blimey, shagging, knickers, bollocks. Oh God. I'm English." The short list of English swear words, with varying degrees of offence, is the ideal lexical marker not just for Spike's being English but also for his diminished punk credentials. Verbal offence has always been a marker of punk. Famously Sid Vicious said "fuck" on a British television show which led to the presenter being sacked and the tabloids fulminating against the state of the nation's youth. Spike's choice are, for the most part, primary school insults with little shock value, except, perhaps, "bollocks." Interestingly, when the show was aired by the BBC in its prime time slot, this scene was cut. Apparently Spike is more punk than we might have believed. Giles, demonstrating dignity through irony simply retorts, "Welcome to the nancy tribe."

This exchange has allowed for a presentation of the clichés that Giles and Spike represent. Clearly, the viewers are aware of their pre-history but the characters are allowed to act simply as ciphers for their competing claims to Englishness. One of the elements that separates these two versions of being English is age. Giles is both an older man and, therefore, in terms of the representational economy being used, more likely to subscribe to the values that are seen as quintessentially English. Spike, who is younger, is able to represent

the claims of youth and rebellion and the subversion of these. Not only that, the two characters are synecdochic of broader cultural and historical versions of Englishness, or more particularly, English masculinity.

These ideas are brought together in the conceit that they inadvertently assume each other to be a relative: son and father. Spike, misreading the positions in which Giles and Anya awoke calls her a “trollop” and Giles, irked at being called old says, “you’re not too old to put across my knee, you know, sonny” thereby fulfilling the role of stern public school father-cum-teacher.

Not knowing his name, Spike looks in his clothes in a fashion not dissimilar to a child at school who has a name tag written inside. What he sees is the label, “Randy.” Simultaneously both English and an aggrieved son, Spike laments, “Randy Giles? Why not just call me Horny Giles or desperate-for-a-shag Giles?,” once again drawing attention to lexical difference between British and American English, but also emphasising an assumed preoccupation with sex as well as an emasculating dread.

The episode resolves itself into a searingly painful denouement with Giles leaving, Tara and Willow breaking up and Spike and Buffy entangled and confused. The situation comedy has occurred amidst one of the darker story-lines of *Buffy* and has served again to demonstrate the “genre-busting” wishes of Joss Whedon. In doing this, it has also enabled a self-conscious examination of the sorts of representations of English masculinity that the programme has been undertaking. These aspects of the show rarely fall prey to moralising nor to promoting one sort of discursive framework as being better than another. In many ways, the juxtapositions of Englishness operate in the same way as the generic or thematic collisions insofar as they expand the possibilities of the show. Giles, Wesley and Spike are all simply characters, of course, but in their interactions with each other and the other characters in *Buffy*, they offer a range of notions of English masculinity that trade upon but also contribute to the store of clichés, stereotypes and models which allow for a discursive notion of the concept in the first place.

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