

What You Leave Behind

Popular Culture Analysis by Marshall Henderson, English 101

In March of 1997, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* introduced the world to a retelling of classic sci-fi and fantasy movie monsters through a lens that only Joss Whedon could create. In the beginning, the show focused on vapid entertainment in the form of high school drama and demon-slaying violence. As the series progressed, however, there was a gradual shift into deeper philosophical and emotional content. "The Body," the sixteenth episode of season five, is perhaps the strongest example of this. This episode removed nearly every supernatural element from the show in favor of an authentic and emotional experience—to which every person can relate. "The Body" effectively utilizes the experiences and relationships of the characters to explore the surreal reality surrounding a death.

The episode opens with Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar) returning home, opening the door, and calling into the house with, "Hey, Mom." She goes through some arbitrary dialogue, then turns to look into the living room. She sees her mother, played by Kristine Sutherland, on the couch, clearly not moving. Buffy asks what she's doing, immediately becoming concerned. A flashback of a happy Christmas memory plays, a dinner table surrounded by friends and family. A sense of happiness and family permeates the scene. Buffy's friends and family sit around a table after the main part of the meal. Joyce, Buffy's mother, stands to get the pies at the end of the meal. After some playful banter between Joyce and Buffy, the scene abruptly ends as a pie falls to the ground, cutting away to Joyce staring with an empty expression. The paramedics arrive, but they cannot wake her up. Joyce is dead.

The rest of the episode guides the viewer through the ripples of Joyce's death, exploring the impact it has on each of her family members and friends, as well as their relationships. Willow (Alyson Hannigan) frets over what to wear to the hospital--worrying about whether each outfit is appropriate. Xander (Nicholas Brendon) feels angry, criticizing the doctors for their inability to do anything to prevent Joyce's death, eventually punching through a wall. Anya (Emma Caulfield) doesn't understand the idea of mortality and life, resulting in her asking inappropriate questions. Tara (Amber Benson) knew Joyce primarily through her relationship with Willow, so she awkwardly plays a peripheral, supporting role—trying to be there without getting in the way. Dawn (Michelle Trachtenberg), Buffy's sister, is in shock at first, then fixates on wanting to see the body without understanding what her being "gone" means. Each character goes through his or her own process of grief and acceptance, coming together at the end to support one another.

"The Body" produces an exceptionally effective display of death and its effects and does this primarily through the nearly complete absence of melodrama. Perhaps the most potent example is how quiet the episode is. With each scene, Whedon introduces us to another character's attempts to cope with the death. The viewer sees flashes of emotion and attempts at understanding. The swelling music, pounding rain, and wailing sobs are conspicuously missing. In fact, long stretches of the episode invite silence. Scenes will last even after the dialogue has ended and characters have left the scene and, without any backing musical track, Whedon leaves emptiness hanging in the air—seemingly to emphasize Joyce's absence. Uncut, single-shot scenes follow characters without quick transitions or changing angles to imply action. With only sounds of movement accompanying them, these long shots give the viewer an acute awareness of each moment that makes the day of the tragedy seem so much longer.

While much of the episode focuses on what isn't there, the absence associated with death contrasts what remains: life. Shortly after finding the body, Buffy steps outside. It's a beautiful day—wind chimes tinkle in the background and the laughter of children can be faintly heard. Whedon shows the viewer this completely contrary expression of a death compared to most media representations,

where deaths invite storms and cause the entire world to stop for that one event. Later in the episode, Xander visits Willow so they can travel to the hospital. He double-parks and goes in. After the conversation ends and they prepare to leave, the camera moves outside from the window, looking down at his car, and the traffic officer leaving a ticket on his windshield. A controversial scene at the end of the episode occurs while Dawn is in the morgue and is attacked by a vampire. Buffy steps in, fights the vampire and eventually kills him. Many criticize the scene for being out of place, for breaking the somber flow of the episode. This episode, however, follows with the previous examples of pointing out one of the most important themes of the episode: death—no matter how important to the people around it—does not stop life from going on.

What is perhaps the most overarching theme in the episode is the idea of “negative space.” While Dawn is in her art class, prior to learning about Joyce’s death, she works on drawing a statue. The teacher instructs them to “remember, we’re not drawing the object. We’re drawing the negative space around the object. The space around. The space in between” (Whedon). This is less a description of the assignment than a description of the episode. The episode is not about the fact that Joyce died, but about the space around Joyce and the space between people. It’s about the growth and development of relationships, about what connects and what separates those that knew her. These people stand together, as family, as friends, and in love. They support each other, but deal with the death independently. The viewer sees each person shortly after learning of the news, all as separate groups. It isn’t until the end of the episode, after each person has digested the news and begun coming to terms with it, that the viewer ever sees them all together.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a series of real-life circumstance dressed up in a fantasy backdrop. This is precisely why an episode like “The Body,” something so completely focused on the reality, has such a powerful impact. With this, Whedon exposes the viewer to the naked core of the story. The characters are designed to be reflections of real people, used as vehicles to facilitate a discussion of reality. “The Body” is a conversation with the viewer about the way that people relate, and the evolution of these relationships as people themselves are changed, and it is one that is definitely worthwhile.

Works Cited

Whedon, Joss, dir. “The Body.” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete Fifth Season*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.