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**DEATH AS A GIFT IN J.R.R TOLKIEN'S WORK AND *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE
SLAYER***

“Love will bring you to your gift” is what Buffy is told by a spiritual being under the guise of the First Slayer in the Episode “Intervention” (5.18). The young woman is intrigued and tries to learn more about her gift. The audience is hooked as well: a gift in this show could be a very powerful artefact, like a medieval weapon, and as Buffy has to vanquish a Goddess in this season, the viewers are waiting for the guide to bring out the guns. However, the guide reveals that “Death is [her] gift.” The heroine, and the viewers with her, are baffled. Buffy understands that killing, giving death, is her only gift. She interprets the phrase to mean that killing is her talent: she is really good at terminating monsters. Indeed, as underlined by Rhonda V. Wilcox, the life of a Slayer is dictated by death; “like the king in a patriarchal succession, each Slayer is born to the position and assumes it only on the death of the preceding Slayer” (Wilcox 4). She herself will be relieved of her responsibility on the day of her own death. In the meantime, she will confront undead creatures to which she will bring death on a daily basis. She is trained in the art of giving death in multiple situations, in various ways, with many different weapons. Still mourning her mother, who had passed away two episodes before in “The Body” (5.16), Buffy is not really inclined to see Death as a gift one way or another. However, the guide disappears without further explanation, leaving Buffy and the audience in the same state of confusion.

The association of Death with something as positive as a gift, something willingly bestowed to another person as a token of gratitude or attachment, is likely to be viewed as either odd or tragically cruel by a 20th century Western mind. Indeed, since the Romantic era, death has generally been associated with tragedy and loss, as it is supposed to be the end of an individual and the separation between loved ones (Ariès 178). However, to Tolkien's fans this association feels familiar. Indeed, in *The Silmarillion*, the Elves refer to human death as the Gift of Ilúvatar (*S* 318). Men in Middle-earth are rewarded at the end of their short existence with the possibility, or so the Elves believe, of escaping the circles of the World and perhaps joining Eru Ilúvatar, the name of the Creator in Elvish. The Eldar, being bound to Eä, harbor a great envy for this particular present only bestowed to Men, which can seem paradoxical for immortal creatures, at least from a mortal point of view.

BODY AND SOUL

It is interesting that Tolkien and Whedon, two prolific artists of the 20th century working in different media, the first a devout Roman Catholic and the second a convinced atheist, both developed a mixed of Aristotelian and

Platonic vision of death. This is a vision of the soul as a vessel of the personality and the essence of a being that survives the death of the body, which is only a flesh receptacle. (Phaedo, 62b) Claudio Testi affirms that Tolkien's vision of the soul is a sort of "Aristotelized Platonism" (Testi 176). In the exposition of the Myth of Er, Plato presents the union between the body and the soul as accidental. The two distinct entities are forced together in a way. In contrast, Tolkien views the normal course of life as *hroä* and *feä* living in harmony because they belong together. The separation of the two is seen as unnatural.

In *Buffy*, the mere concept of the vampire relies on this idea of body and soul being two apparently distinctive entities able to survive one without the other; or more precisely, the soul, being immortal, survives somewhere while the body disappears. In "Becoming" (2.21-22) the restoration spell as uttered by Willow mentions the interregnum. We could suppose it refers to a place between realms, like the demi-monde described in *Penny Dreadful* or the limbo of Christian tradition.) However, in the Buffyverse, when one is killed by a vampire, one's soul departs the body resulting in one's death, and the soul is replaced by a sort of demon remembering the dead person's life. What Scott McLaren calls the "second soul" which derives from Aristotle's thesis that a body can't survive without a soul, an idea that is prevailing in vampire folklore. Angel expresses it himself in the episode "Angel" (1.7): "when you become a vampire, the demon takes your body but it doesn't get your soul. That's gone." The body is therefore thought of as a vehicle which can accept many passengers, or as it is often referred to by demons in the TV show *Supernatural*, a "meat suit." This derogatory term however diverges from the Platonic vision in which the body, if somewhat inferior to the soul, is still sacred.

The vision also diverges from Plato in another way, as explained by Marguerite Krause. Indeed, in the Buffyverse, the vampire keeps memories and traits of the deceased: "Even though the human soul is gone, the demon has complete access to all of the human's memories, behavioral traits and personal habits. Whedon and the other writers of *Buffy* and *Angel* may not think of it in this terms, but the implication is that memory and personality are stored in the physical body" (Krause 105). The soul imprints thoughts and traits inside the body creating a link, an interdependence between soul and physical form. If the body survives without the soul, it keeps traces, marks the soul left. It might be the reason why when summoned back, only the soul previously inhabiting the body comes back, and not any soul passing by, though it seems the demonic possession can be rather random.

Tolkien's conception of Elvish souls is the opposite, as Elves can choose through reincarnation to inhabit a brand-new new body like Glorfindel (*PME* 379) or their own like Miriel (*Morgoth's Ring* 256 but not the body of another entity. They can also choose not to be reincarnated and to stay in the Hall of Mandos. However, this reflection on the destiny of Elvish souls evolved throughout Tolkien's life, alongside his understanding of the different

perceptions of death from elvish and human point of view, showing that both concepts were paramount in importance and intertwined.

Marguerite Krause argues that this imprinting of the body by the soul makes vampires “such disturbing monsters. When someone is killed by a vampire, their surviving friends and relations are confronted with a double horror: the grief of losing someone they loved, plus the agony of facing an utterly evil being who looks, sounds and acts almost exactly like the person they once knew” (Krause 105). Creating a vampire in this light is an additional level of desecration of the body and mockery of life and thus encroaches on divine power. So the death given by a slayer might actually be a gift not only to the mourning relatives but perhaps also to the soul of the human whose body has been inhabited. If a part of that soul was indeed still present in the body and another part in another world or dimension, then the soul becomes whole again and is reattached to the body, thus allowing the being to be one again in death.

This vision of the soul makes it possible for a character like Angel to exist in all his complexity and sometimes contradictions: a particularly vicious character, Angelus is cursed by a Romanian clan (“Becoming” 2.21/22) after he murdered one of their own. The curse restores the vampire’s soul to his dead body, plaguing him with the appalling memories of all his deeds as a vampire and transfixing him with remorse and guilt. We learn in the episode “The Dark Age” (2.8) that the demon is still trapped in Angel’s body but his human soul has taken over. In this episode, as the demon Eyghon the Sleepwalker can only possess unconscious or dead bodies, the gang force him into Angel’s. There seems to be a fight inside Angel’s head. He reveals that the demon inside him cannot have his way so the fight against Eyghon was a blessing. “I had a demon inside me for a couple hundred years. Waiting for a good fight.” In that instance there were three different ‘souls’ inside Angel.

Janet Brennan Croft notes that this change of soul is often but not always accompanied by a change of name. In Angel’s case, his name as a human was Liam; he was renamed Angelus upon becoming a vampire but renamed himself Angel when his soul was given back to him. According to Croft, “The name he uses after he is re-ensouled by the gypsy curse, *Angel*, balances the deep irony of the source of his name with aspirational symbolism and his hope for atonement” (Croft 28). This erasing of one’s name corresponding to the changing of one’s soul reminds one of Sméagol becoming Gollum after the theft of the Ring and the murder of Déagol (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, I.2.67).

Spike, as well, after his attempted rape of Buffy, hopes to find redemption. In “Grave” (6.22), he ends up in Africa going through excruciating trials devised by a demon who gives him his soul back after asking him if he wants to be restored to his former self. Once he passed the three demon trials, Spike asks: “Give me what I want, make me what I was, so Buffy can get what she deserves.” Lloyd, the demon, restores his soul. Kowalski notes that here Whedon uses the concept of the soul to mean a

conscience, a possibility to distinguish evil and good creatures; it is also an opportunity for a creature to know the difference between good and bad. It then provides free will to those who possess one. In his words,

On *Buffy* the soul functions as a moral compass, allowing one to discern the difference between right and wrong,” and, regarding Angel or Spike, it facilitates “the ability to overcome the evil [nature] within him,” with the result that “redemption is now possible”. Yet Stevenson is clear that, although a soulless creature is an irredeemable monster, possessing a soul does not guarantee one will behave in morally appropriate ways. (Kowalski 3)

In the *Buffyverse*, a soul can be called back from the ether only through magic. Indeed, when Buffy, a human, dies, it is through magic that her friends bring her back to life, calling on Osiris, the Egyptian God of Death, to reunite her soul to her body: “We buried her body. But what about her soul, her essence?” (“Bargaining Part 1” 6.21). In “Bargaining Part 2” (6.22) Buffy’s decomposed corpse is actually reconstructed inside her coffin when her soul is reunited with her body, making her soul and her body indissociable in the sense of Aristotle’s rational *anima*. Unlike in Plato’s myth of Er, the body is neither a prison nor random, but a house, and body/soul form a single entity with one identity, corresponding to Tolkien’s vision of *hroä* and *fëa*.

Knowing Tolkien’s position on magic, this sort of scene can certainly not be expected in Middle-earth. When Lúthien begs for Beren’s soul to be returned after he was killed, nothing is known or shown. Mandos has interceded with Manwë and Eru Ilúvatar is the only one who has the power to perform such a miracle. However, that is the only thing we are allowed to guess. (In every version of the story of Beren and Lúthien their deaths occur off-stage).

Indeed, Tolkien never reveals too much about human destiny in Middle-earth, probably because it was a cause of much contradiction and changes of mind. Yet, as we learn about Whedon’s conception of the soul through the ordeals vampires go through, we learn about the fate of human souls through a comparison with the fate of the immortal creatures they share Middle-earth with: the Elves. The fate of the Elves was a time-consuming reflection on Tolkien’s part, both because of his will to make his invented world consistent but also because this metaphysical question was at the heart of the mythology he wanted to create.

Thus, in the *Lost Tales* the earliest figures of death are Vefantur (later Mandos) and Fui (later Nienna). To Ve, Vefantur’s hall, came the Elves who were slain or died of grief, waiting to be reborn. But Men came before Fui Nienna:

Thither came the sons of Men to hear their doom, and thither are they brought by all the multitude of ills that Melko’s evil music set within

the world. Slaughters and fires, hungers and mishaps, diseases and blows dealt in the dark, cruelty and bitter cold and anguish and their own folly bring them here; and Fui reads their heart. (*BoLT I 77*)

Men have then three possibilities: they dwell in Mandos (Vefantur and Fui's hold), they are seized by Melko to be tormented, or they set sail close enough to glimpse the undying lands and long for the blessed realm before landing in some sort of desert-like purgatory ('*Manumuine*' *BoLT I*, 92) where they wait for the Great End, hearing the music made by those who dwelt with the Valar.

Christopher Tolkien comments in the notes of 'The Gods of Death and the fate of Elves and Men' "This section contains the most surprising and difficult elements.... with the account of Fui Nienna, however, we come upon ideas in deep contradiction to the central thought of the later mythology..." (*BoLT I* 89-90). Indeed the depiction of the two Valar, especially of Fui Nienna living in a gothic-like dark mansion, spreading tears and a cloud of despair upon the world, is at odds with the compassionate version of *The Silmarillion* where Nienna's tears cleanse the mound of Ezelohar from the evil poison of Ungoliant. Fui recalls Hel the goddess of the underworld, daughter of Loki, who takes care of the souls of those who didn't die in battle, and indeed this vision of the land of the dead and its division resemble both the Germanic concept of Hel and Valhalla but also Heaven and Hell. The most Christian element is certainly, as Christopher Tolkien notes, the desert Arvalin, next to Valinor where the souls of Men wait, neither in torment nor bliss for the End of the world.

In "Laws and Customs among the Eldar" the question of the separation of *hroä* or body, made of the substance of Arda, and *fëa*, or spirit, is at the heart of a detailed reflection. It is considered natural for a *hroä* and a *fëa* to find harmony one with the other. Tolkien explains that

The *feär* of the elves were destined to dwell in Arda, and the death of the flesh did not abrogate that destiny. Their *feär* were tenacious therefore of life 'in the raiment of Arda' and far excelled the spirit of Men in power of their 'raiment' even from the first days protecting their bodies from many ills and assault (such as disease), and healing them swiftly from wounds that would have proved fatal to Men. (*Morgoth's Ring* 219)

As in Whedon's vision, for Tolkien the soul and the body of the Elves are linked, and as in Plato's view the soul is superior to the body, here protecting it and giving it its immortality, or at least its endurance in time.

However, if for any reason it has become painful for a *fëa* to remain in the *hroä* it has been assigned to, it can leave. The *hröa* cannot survive without the *fëa* and therefore dies, being, as Whedon's vampires, "meat" without a soul, without a living energy to give it motion and purpose corresponding to the Aristotelian conception of the soul. Once more, if sacred, the *hroä* is

considered inferior to the *fëa*. However the *fëa* lives on and goes to the Halls of Mandos where it awaits judgment and the possibility to be reborn. These decisions belong only to the Valar and this separation is not considered natural by the Eldar who were not destined to die.

LOVE, LOSS AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH

In the *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*, the mortal wise woman Andreth seems to believe that immortality was also the natural fate of men: “Men believed that their *hröar* were not by right short-lived, but had been made so by the malice of Melkor” (*Morgoth’s Ring* 304). Finrod and Andreth bitterly argue over the meaning of death in the eyes of the Elves and Men. Several times in the dialogue Andreth compares death to a hunter, one we cannot escape, as we are his prey. She expresses great bitterness and fear, bitterness at what she sees as injustice done to Men, and fear towards what she feels is the source of human death: Aganno. This is the fear of the shadow of death, a great grief, an event, a great wrong, half remembered even by the Wisest and forever a source of terror and sorrow for men (*Morgoth’s Ring* 219).

She grows impatient with Finrod; she feels he has no right to talk about death because even if elves can die, they do not know the inevitability of human doom. They do not age, they do not get sick, and they can live for millennia, like Galadriel or Elrond. Their dialogue seems doomed to keep them apart as Melkor’s mischief is firmly engrained in Andreth’s mind, as in all Men’s minds: “in after days, when because of the triumph of Morgoth Elves and Men became estranged, as he most wished” (S 124).

Finrod tries to tell the Wise Woman that death cannot proceed from Melko’s power, but only Ilúvatar has the power of bestowing such a gift on his children. However, in the minds of Men death is linked to the place of dwelling of Melko, which is a source of fear. He has devised cruel and gruesome ways to slaughter and torture men, thus making death a source of great fear and anguish (*BoLT I*, “The Coming of the Valar”).

The source of Andreth’s bitterness nevertheless also lies elsewhere: mortal as she is, she had fallen in love with Finrod’s brother Aegnor, who loved her in return but refused to wed her or acknowledge his love. Their different fates drew them apart; faithful to his Elvish roots, especially in those times of war, Aegnor would not renounce his fate and embrace death for the love of Andreth. Had they been together, he would have seen her grow old and feeble while he remained young and strong and didn’t wish to impose this on her or to feel the pain of her passing.

Finrod tries to explain “and we (if not ye) would not rather have a memory that is fair but unfinished than one goes on to grievous end” (*Morgoth’s Ring* 325). Andreth would have accepted their short time together, having herself but a short lifespan, in order to take with her the memory of bliss. But now that Aegnor has perished during the *Dagor Bragollach*, the battle of Sudden Flame, Andreth wonders “What shall I remember?” she has

no intimate memory of him. Aging and war represent a terrible severance between the two Children of Ilúvatar, but also the uncertainty of what will be remembered. While Aegnor might have lived with the memory of Andreth until the end of Middle-earth, Andreth fears that everything she lived and loved will be lost “in time, like tears in rain.”¹ As Andreth explains, “dying we die, and we go out to no return. Death is an uttermost end, a loss irremediable. And it is abominable; for it is also a wrong that is done to us” (*Morgoth's Ring* 311).

As in *Buffy*, love between a mortal and an immortal seems doomed from the start. This is especially the case of Angel, an ensouled vampire, and Buffy, the Slayer destined to kill vampires and all evil creatures. As the Mayor explains to them both, “I don't see a lasting relationship.” When during the verbal joust, Angel reminds the Mayor of his true age, the Mayor jumps on the occasion to further deepen the wound: “And that's one of the things you're going to have to deal with. You're immortal. She's not. It's not easy” (“Choices” 3.19). The Mayor offers as an analogy his relationship with Edna May (probably his late wife) whom he stayed with until she died. He draws a brutal picture of her getting old, her body and mind diminishing to become feeble and ugly, “not a pretty picture” (“Choices” 3.19). Meanwhile, because he has sold his soul as a bargain for immortality, he remains young, to Edna May's distress and anger. While this confession raises many questions about the true nature of the Mayor, it also leads Buffy, Angel and everyone present, including the viewer, to wonder about a possible future between the two lovers given the obvious impediments to their relationship. For example:

- *Their very natures draw them apart.* Buffy is a vampire Slayer and Angel is a vampire; as many characters remind her throughout the series, she should stake him. Giles observes of the situation “A vampire in love with a Slayer. It's rather poetic... in a maudlin sort of way” (“Out of mind, out of sight” 1.11).
- *Angel is a creature of the night, fearing the light of the sun; Buffy is a human, a creature of the light.* As the Mayor points out, there won't be “many picnics in the sun” (“Choices” 3.19).
- *Angel is cursed to turn evil the moment his soul stops plaguing him with remorse and guilt.* Any moment of bliss can turn him into an evil homicidal monster.
- *As an immortal,* Angel would have to see Buffy either be killed at a young age in action, as is the fate for many Slayers before her, or watch her grow old and die.

Similar to the love between Aegnor and Andreth, the relationship between Buffy and Angel seems cursed in its presumed brevity. However, in

¹ *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott, Warner Bros. 1982, Roy Batty, last words before dying

Tolkien's universe the different fate regarding death seem in itself overwhelming for the Elf who would have had to choose either his people, everything he knows and cherish and the certainty to share the same fate as they will, and the woman he loves with a terrible uncertainty as to what is to become of him, his loved ones but the very high probability to be severed for ever from all his family. Idril Celebrindal, Elwing, Lúthien, and Arwen, all Elves, are willing to face these terrible choices for the men they love; yet, Aegnor chooses his duty to his people in the face of their most dangerous enemy. Ironically, Buffy and Andreth, though mortals, live to see their immortal lovers die. In the case of Angel, his death comes at Buffy's hand, in order to save the world.

Yet, Michael Devaux makes a link between *The Lord of the Rings* and Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* in saying that for both authors the fairy tale often shows how to go from a selfish desire of eternity to an acceptance of one's own mortality through love: "In both cases, it is the question of Love that determines the relation to oneself and to one's own death"² (Devaux 40). What better examples of this choice of mortality for love than the characters of Lúthien and Arwen who renounce their immortality, and accept being severed from their people in complete ignorance of what might happen to them for the love of a man? As Finrod told Andreth "if any marriage can be between our kindred and thine, then it shall be for some high purpose of Doom" (*Morgoth's Ring* 324). And, indeed the sacrifice of both elves became legend and highlighted the fates of both Men and Eldar. Nevertheless, the theme that emerges from both tales is not aging and decaying but loss. Because Thingol was afraid to lose his daughter, he asked Beren to go on an impossible quest which, Thingol hopes, will claim his life. It does indeed, after Beren is mortally wounded by Carcaroth, Lúthien bids him to wait for her "beyond the Western Sea" (*Silmarillion* 224). However, before Mandos, Lúthien weaves a poignant song expressing her pain of being forever separated from Beren without hope of reunion in death and in so doing unveils to the Valar the anguish of both Elves and Men, who share the same world when alive but who are forever apart in death.

The sorrow not only of two individuals but of two entire peoples moved Mandos for the first and the last time. Lúthien's song of sorrow is so moving that it brings Mandos to lenience and pity and he pleads on behalf of the two lovers to Manwë, who gives Lúthien the choice either to go to Aman alone and forget the pain and suffering from her life, or to live a new life with Beren, renouncing her immortality without certitude of happiness.

Immortality can then be taken away from the Eldar, should they choose to become mortal; however the Valar do not have the power to sever men from death. As a gift given by Ilúvatar, the Valar have no power to take it

² Devaux, "Dans les deux cas, c'est la question de l'amour qui arbitre le rapport soi et à sa propre mort." (my translation)

from any mortal. As Andreth before him, Beren, even for the love of an Eldar cannot refuse the gift. From the human perspective death does not feel like a gift.

Buffy, as well, is baffled by the Guide's pronouncement that death is her gift. She certainly doesn't feel this way going into her first death at the hands of the Master, in order to fulfill her destiny (although she was later revived by Xander) ("Prophecy Girl" 1.12). She must not have felt death to be a gift when Kendra, the Slayer activated when she first died, was murdered by Drusilla ("Becoming Part 1" 2.21). The trauma she experienced after killing Angel in order to save the world certainly didn't feel like a gift ("Becoming Part 2" 2.22). Death did not seem to be a gift when she found the dead body of her mother in her living room ("The body" 5.16). Buffy certainly didn't need Mayor Wilkins' lesson about his own marriage to feel that her own mortality was a burden in the accomplishment of her deepest wish: a future with Angel. For mortals, the future always means death. We can doubt Mayor Wilkins' love for his Edna May, first because of his brutality and detachment when talking about her death, but also because of what he doesn't say: he chose to part from his own mortality, something the people of Middle-earth cannot do, and in the process abandon Edna May to her fate. He is not capable of love because he is obsessed by his own desire for immortality, a trait described by Devaux (Devaux 42). Similarly, Buffy's former classmate Ford, diagnosed with brain cancer, is ready to sacrifice Buffy, his friends and several innocent people to strike a deal with Spike to make him immortal ("Lie to me" 2.07). Ford, like the Mayor, places his own survival above the lives of others. Indeed, fear of the Shadow of Death often makes mortals devalue other people's lives.

Tolkien develops the same idea in the *Akallabêth*: terrified at their idea of their own death and jealous of the Elves' immortality, the Kings of Númenor sacrifice those among them who remained faithful to the Elves and the Valar by burning them in the temple erected in honor of Morgoth after Sauron had poisoned their mind with the fear of death (*Silmarillion* 329).

When compared to Buffy's behavior in the face of death, these other characters seem childish and selfish. Buffy could also choose to renounce her mortality and be turned into a vampire. However, she can't even contemplate having a relationship with Angel similar to what Spike and Drusilla have, because her soul would depart from her body and a demon would take her place. She would then lose Angel's love. It would also be a terrible betrayal of her duty as a Slayer, as she would put into danger all those she loves and must protect. Buffy accepts her own mortality, twice, bolstered by the power of love.

Love similarly drove Lúthien to not only accept, but seek out, the gift of death. After the death of Beren, because of the love they feel for each other, the sacrifices they were ready to make for each other's sake, all the ordeals they faced together, Lúthien let her sorrow consume her so that her *fëa* came to the halls of Mandos. The Great Powers were moved to make a miracle for

them and bring Beren back to life so they could live together, albeit for a limited time. But even before their deaths, Lúthien's choices had made her mortal already, as Huan told Beren just before they entered Morgoth's stronghold to take the Silmarils:

From the shadow of death you can no longer save Lúthien, for by her love she is now subject to it. You can turn now from your fate and lead her into exile, seeking peace in vain while your life lasts. But if you will not deny your doom, then either Lúthien, being forsaken, must assuredly die alone, or she must with you challenge the fate that lies before you – hopeless, yet not certain. (*Silmarillion* 215)

We can only guess that Beren and Lúthien died together as they disappear from the tale until the necklace bearing the Silmaril is sent to Dior their son as a sign he has inherited it. Even if their tale seems to have a rather happy ending, it is, nonetheless, tainted with parting and loss. As Arwen will have to part with her father, Lúthien must part from her parents and her kin. Melian the Maia knows what fate awaits her daughter: “she knew that a parting beyond the end of the World had come between them and no grief of loss have been heavier than the grief of the heart of Melian the Maia” (*The War of the Jewels* 70-71).

Similarly the parting between Elrond and his daughter is said to be one of the most poignant in the songs and legends of Middle-earth. Elrond has already lost his twin brother Elros who, when given the same choice as his parents Eärendil and Elwing, chose the fate of Men and became the forefather of the Númenóreans. Elrond has been severed from his parents, probably forever, and his wife whom at least he can hope to be reunited with once he takes the ship to Valinor. So when Arwen chose Aragorn's fate “For Elrond therefore all chances of the war of the Ring were fraught with sorrow” (*LOTR* Appendix A 1072). The narrative continues: “but there will be no choice before Arwen, my beloved, unless you, Aragorn Arathorn's son, come between us and bring one of us, you or me, to a bitter parting beyond the end of the world. You do not know what you desire of me.”

Loss in both tales is a greater evil than death; it is easier to die than to live without a loved one. Arwen does not regret having to choose to become mortal, even if from the beginning she knew what would be the cost: “And then she stood as still as a white tree, looking into the West, and at last she said: ‘I will cleave to you, Dúnadan, and turn from the Twilight. Yet there lies the land of my people and the long home of all my kin.’ She loved her father dearly” (*LotR* Appendix A 1098).

The loss of Aragorn, however, is more than she can bear. Beings raised mortal, seeing many of their relatives die of old age, disease, or accidents, might learn and prepare themselves for the loss of a loved one or count on their friends and family to help them through the mourning process. When Aragorn dies, all of Arwen's family have crossed over to Aman. She only has

her children who, being children, know less about death and mourning than elders would. Arwen's grief echoes Lúthien's song of sorrow for the parting of Eldar and Men never to meet again. However, Aragorn has not been unjustly slaughtered; he has chosen his time and has passed peacefully, even trying to teach Arwen hope. But Arwen cannot call his soul back and when parting from him she acknowledges the misunderstanding between Men and Eldar when it comes to death: "But I say to you King of the Númenóreans, not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last. For if this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive." As she has not received it yet, she cannot know, and so out of grief she goes back to where she first met Aragorn. It is a terrible place for her, full of the ghosts of the departed; those she might meet again and those she has lost forever (*LotR* Appendix A 1100).

THE POWER OF MOURNING

Arwen is like a child bereaved and without the support of her family, who have all left to the West. Had they been here to support her, little could they have done who knew so little of Death. Her father only could have understood the grief of loss. She is alone in her grief and mourning.

Buffy and her sister Dawn also have to face the death of their mother Joyce ("The Body" 5.16). Dawn, with Spike's help, finds a spell to bring Joyce back. Buffy tries to dissuade her but when she hears the footstep of what is supposed to be their mother, she gives in to her desire to see her mother again. Dawn eventually reverses the spell and the sisters are left in each other's embrace, finally giving way to their grief as they cry together ("Forever" 5.17).

At the time of her own death Buffy, like Arwen, is alone to face this terrible ordeal, but she would rather die than see her sister Dawn be slaughtered. Through her love for her sister, she finds a way to her gift: a peaceful death as she has accepted her own mortality through love. However, the first episodes of Season 6 shows how far Buffy's friends are from dealing with their loss; all of them feeling guilty for her death. Willow has not even tried to mourn. She only begins to when she believes the spell to bring Buffy back has failed and cries out "She is really gone" ("Bargaining Part 1" 6.1) showing she had been in denial until that moment. Her struggle to control the extraordinary magic power she has acquired, the self-confidence it gives her and her incapacity to deal with the loss of Buffy will even make Willow the bad guy at the end of that season when Xander, through love, will bring her the gift of mourning, grieving but accepting. Willow has become the villain, because, as in the cases of Ford, the Mayor and Tolkien's Númenóreans, she has not come to terms with mortality (in this case not her own but that of a loved one). Her first reflex is to "rectify" Tara's death. When she is denied, she becomes a selfish entity bent on revenge rather than mourning; the lives of others, including her loved ones, seem to have lost all value.

Upon returning from the dead Buffy feels separated from her former friends; a gap has opened up between them. The Scooby gang speak of Death as Andreth and her people do, as a wrong that has been done to them because they also are victims of the fear of the shadow of Death. Buffy always reacts negatively every time they talk in glorious words about their tearing her away from a well-deserved and peaceful rest. When she decides to thank them in order not to antagonize them she carefully chooses her words: “and the world came rushing back. You guys gave me the world. I can’t tell you what it means to me” (“After Life” 6.13). They selfishly interpret the phrase as a token of Buffy’s gratitude while she expresses a terrible pain and sense of loss. Had they been able to deal with their loss, had they engaged in a mourning process, they would not have acted so cruelly to their best friend and saviour. Indeed, both in the Buffyverse and Middle-earth being able to mourn is a gift, a blessing.

Tolkien’s chosen means to alleviate the cruelty and sorrow of loss is to create a new divinity: Nienna. In the *Books of Lost Tales*, first named Fui, (“night”), the Death-Goddess, judged Men’s souls. In the *Silmarillion*, she is longer a cruel deity of death and hell, but the figure of the *pieta*, the incarnation of sorrow. Her tears are powerful, washing away the evil of Ungoliant. Hers are the tears of salvation that through mourning vanquish the evil influence of Morgoth, showing that through tears of mourning can we overcome the pain of loss. From a cruel pagan death divinity, she becomes a Marian figure towards whom individuals turn when loss is overwhelming. She first cast tears upon the world and eventually cleanses the world from Morgoth’s lies and reinstates Death as a gift. As Kristine Larsen highlights, the evolution of Nienna through the different versions of *The Silmarillion* is significant in that she takes on might and power almost equal to Varda as both Elves and Men can cry to her. A figure of mercy and hope, she is central to Tolkien’s mythology and Larsen argues that “Tolkien meant for us to consider Nienna’s later role in his subcreation as parallel to the role of Mary in the Catholic world” (Larsen 201). Tolkien’s own devotion to Mary and his insistence on Death being a divine gift makes it likely that in his mythology he would place, not dark and cruel divinity, reinforcing the image of death as a result of evil but rather a mother-like comforting deity helping mortals to grieve their departed loved ones. Through her tears of mourning Nienna shows us the way to come to an acceptance of our own mortality, and provides an outlet for the suffering of loved ones left behind. We simultaneously acknowledge the pain but avoid letting Aganno perverse our grief into a selfish desire for immortality.

CONCLUSION

If Buffy’s fate serves as an example, (we don’t know what happens to Kendra after she is killed in Season 2 “Becoming Part 1,” and the fate of Faith, if

considering all her actions and choice, is rather obscure), it seems Slayers are rewarded for the good they have done on this Earth by freeing it from vampires and other demonic creatures threatening not only human lives but also their souls, as they can represent a temptation towards sin and eternal damnation. As a champion of good, even a messianic figure, as Roslyn Weaver puts it, a Slayer's reward is the peace of a Heavenly rest, away from the hardship of a life of violence and danger. "Drawing more explicit links between Buffy and Christ, Xander rephrases the popular 'What would Jesus do' expression into a secular version: 'When it's dark, and I'm alone, and I'm scared, or freaked out or whatever, I always think, 'What would Buffy do?' You're my hero'" (Weaver 70; quoting "The Freshman" 4.1).

Indeed when the higher force or divine power claims Buffy's life and her friends decide to bring her back for rather selfish reasons, all Hell breaks loose and a series of catastrophic events strikes. For Whedon the gift of death seems to be the ultimate accolade for a life of defending Good. It is a rather Judeo-Christian view of the afterlife where it is believed good deeds on Earth will be rewarded and evil punished. It is not explicitly explained if the gift extends to the rest of the human species or not.

However, the Gift of Ilúvatar is not said to be a special reward for special individuals. The gift of death is bestowed upon all humans, and as seen with Beren and Andreth they cannot escape it. Tolkien is not clear as to the destination of the souls or if there are equivalents to Hell and Heaven for deserving and undeserving souls. What is clear is that, unlike elves who are reincarnated, possibly endlessly, until Arda is no more, men's souls leave the circles of Middle-earth achieving true immortality as they are supposed to survive the end of the world. The Eldar know that when Arda dies, they will die with it, being of Arda. They know also that upon dying Men leave Arda and might live eternally near Eru, even after Elvenkind and Arda are no more. This knowledge makes the Eldar envy the Gift of Ilúvatar and ignorance makes Men reject it, illustrating Tolkien's comment in a letter to C. Outbiter: "But certainly Death is not an Enemy! I said, or meant to say, that the 'message' was the hideous peril of confusing true 'immortality' with limitless serial longevity" (*Letters* 208).

Whether it is through serial longevity in the form of reincarnation, or serial replenishment by consuming the blood of humans, Tolkien and Whedon appear to agree that extended life can be a curse, and that the release of death can be a blessing. This is exemplified in the deaths of both Aragorn and Buffy. They choose the moment of their deaths: Buffy as a sacrifice for others, and Aragorn "having long since come to terms with his own mortality and having accomplished all that was given for him to accomplish, he at last feels his death coming on" (Amendt-Raduege 28). Amy Amendt-Raduege sees *The Lord of the Rings* as an *ars moriendi*, a text illustrating the art of dying well, through the positive example of Aragorn and the rebuke of all creatures trying to prolong their life and Claudio Testi considers the entire *Legendarium* is a *meditatio mortis*. In its own way, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or at least Season 6

of the series, can be described as a modern *ars moriendi*. In both works, characters are given perhaps the ultimate choice. They either elect to embark on a quest for immortality (fraught with the possibility to fall into the sins of selfishness and domination over others) or set forth on a journey filled with doubt and very human mistakes, once which leads them to ultimately choose to accept the Gift of Death.

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