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Cover Page Footnote

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“EVER-DEFEATED NEVER ALTOGETHER SUBDUED”: FIGHTING THE LONG DEFEAT IN TOLKIEN’S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* AND WHEDON’S *ANGEL*

In a letter to his son Christopher during the height of World War II, J.R.R. Tolkien lamented the evils of the present war (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [Letters] 89). While expressing relief that “the news is good today” and hope that “[t]hings may begin to move fast now, if not quite so fast as some think,” the letter gradually darkens in tone, with Tolkien acknowledging and disavowing atrocities committed and propaganda perpetuated by both the Allies and Axis powers: “the devil and the deep sea [...] and you can stick which D you like on to which side you like.” Tolkien speculates that his feelings of ambiguity—his warring senses of patriotism and discomfort with imperialism—would have been much the same if he had been a Roman citizen during the peak of the empire. “However it’s always been going on in different terms,” he concludes to his son, “you and I belong to the ever-defeated never altogether subdued side.”

In this passage, Tolkien applies to his personal life a theme that dominated his fiction, that of the “long defeat.” The phrase is taken from *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*) chapter “The Mirror of Galadriel.” Closely following the death of Gandalf, leader of the Fellowship of the Ring, the elf Galadriel comforts the Fellowship with the thought that some good may come of their respite in Lothlórien. Speaking of the power, wisdom, and longevity of herself and her husband Celeborn, Galadriel explains that “ere the fall of Nargothrond or Gondolin I passed over the mountains, and together through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat” (II.7.376). Several characteristics link Galadriel’s phrase to Tolkien’s letter quoted above: the hope found in hopeless circumstances; the ongoing and repetitive nature of war (the ancient Elven strongholds of Nargothrond and Gondolin bear the same weight of antiquity that ancient Rome conveys to Tolkien’s readers); the paradoxical coexistence of victory and defeat. Indeed, the phrase “ever-defeated never altogether subdued” succinctly conveys the contradictory nature of the long defeat. Both full victory and complete despair are antithetical to its nature.

These same motifs and themes can be found in another popular fantasy: the television show *Angel* (1999-2004) created by writer-producers Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt. As will be demonstrated by examples from both Tolkien’s and Whedon’s works, paradox and duality are essential to the theme of the long defeat and the narratives of their respective stories. By putting these two stories in conversation, “the long defeat” is defined as more than mere ongoing conflict or gradual entropy but by its characteristic qualities of repetitiveness and paradox.

To balance the discussions of these authors, this analysis is primarily confined to the actions and motivations of the characters in Tolkien’s and Whedon’s stories rather than to the worldviews and statements of the authors. In addition to avoiding the intentional fallacy, it should also be noted that Tolkien’s

legendarium is the work of a single author (albeit one with evolving and sometimes contradictory views) written over the course of his entire life, whereas Whedon and Greenwalt collaborated with many other writers and directors during *Angel's* five-season run, including Mere Smith, David Fury, Elizabeth Craft, Sarah Fain, Tim Minear, and Jeffrey Bell, among others. Such different conventions of authorship make comparison in these terms difficult. Thus, discussion will be limited mostly to the themes found in these fictional worlds.

SEEING IT THROUGH: RESISTANCE AND RESIGNATION IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

As the phrase “the long defeat” is taken from Tolkien, some acknowledgement of biographical parallels and authorial intention (insofar as it can be surmised) is necessary. Scholars have demonstrated the applicability of the long defeat to Tolkien’s biography. Notable examples include Tom Shippey’s exploration of Tolkien’s professional philological career as a long defeat in his essay “Fighting the Long Defeat” and his book *The Road to Middle-earth*, as well as Verlyn Flieger’s study *Splintered Light*, which compares motifs of light and dark in Tolkien’s work to his friend Owen Barfield’s Anthroposophist theories of the evolution of human language and imagination. In her book, Flieger demonstrates that:

[W]ords were for Tolkien not simply a window onto the past but the key to that lost relationship between humanity and God of which a sense of the Fall is the only memory. Words are the clearest record of the ‘long defeat’ of which he wrote, and we may imagine that he saw them also as the vehicles for the ‘glimpses of final victory’ for which he hoped. (8-9)

Tolkien’s biographer Humphrey Carpenter noted the recurrence of devastating loss in Tolkien’s life, primarily in the early losses of his parents and his close friends in World War I. Tolkien’s pessimistic view, as summarized by Carpenter, was that, “Nothing was safe. Nothing would last. No battle would be won for ever” (Carpenter 39). But equally, these same experiences contributed to Tolkien’s dogged optimism and refusal to ever give up. As Shippey notes, “With his best friends dead in Flanders, Tolkien had cause to hate [defeatism] like poison” (*Road to Middle-earth* [Road] 155). Carpenter concludes this antithesis made Tolkien “into two people,” both pessimist and optimist (39). Though the extremity of this conclusion might be questioned, nevertheless the tension of these dissonant impulses does add complexity to Tolkien’s work.

Tolkien openly acknowledged the personal applicability of the long defeat by his use of the term in another letter, written after the publication of *LotR*. Here, he explained to a fan that:

Actually I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat'—though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory. (*Letters* 255)

Other letters come close to discussing the theme as openly, though they stop short of direct quotation. In another letter discussing the protagonist Frodo Baggins' apparent failures and inability to fully return to the Shire, Tolkien posited the idea that "'victors' never can enjoy 'victory'—not in the terms that they envisaged" (235) and stated that *LotR* as a book was concerned with the themes of "[d]eath as part of the nature, physical and spiritual, of Man, and with Hope without guarantees" (237). In a much earlier letter to his son Michael on the topic of gender-relations and the Christian Fall, Tolkien declared "the world has been 'going to the bad' all down the ages" (48).

We also see the theme crop up in Tolkien's academic and scholarly writing. "On Fairy-stories" and "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien's two most influential and famous essays, both touch on this theme. Explicating the nature of "eucatastrophe" or the happy turn in a fairy-story and its corresponding value of Christian belief in ultimate joy, Tolkien acknowledged that eucatastrophe can "never be counted on to recur" and that far from "deny[ing] the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance" ("On Fairy-stories" 75). In his essay on *Beowulf*, Tolkien pronounced what he called the "theory of courage" the "great contribution of early Northern literature": i.e., the "creed of undying will" in which (quoting W.P. Ker) "[gods and men] *are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins.*" Despite assured defeat, these heroes "*who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation*" (21, Tolkien's emphasis).

These personal and scholarly writings help clarify motifs related to the long defeat found in Tolkien's legendarium: the importance of Tolkien's Catholic faith with its dual beliefs in a fallen world and "glimpses of final victory" (inherent in Middle-earth's theistic cosmology); skepticism regarding worldly victories (conveyed in the heavily dubious quotation marks around the words "victors" and "victory") and the assurance that even such limited victories as there are will never directly benefit those who sacrificed to attain them; a persistent sense of gradual decline in the world; the existence of "[h]ope without guarantees," reflected in the unreliable nature of eucatastrophe; the necessary symbiosis of eucatastrophe and dyscatastrophe; and the desperate nobility of the theory of courage, of continuing

to fight without hope of victory or reward. It is this strange mix of elements, derived from both Christian and pagan literature and points of view, which imbues the long defeat with poignancy. Given the complexity of Tolkien's thoughts and beliefs, it is no wonder that his dual impulses for optimism and pessimism found their way into his fiction; and in his concept of the long defeat, they are synthesized and embodied as one truth.

Unsurprisingly, given the source of the term, the Elves provide the clearest and fullest articulations of the long defeat in Tolkien's fiction. Prior to Galadriel's introduction, Elrond makes several similar statements during The Council of Elrond. "There is naught that you can do, other than to resist, with hope or without it," he tells the attendees of the Council; "But you do not stand alone. You will learn that your trouble is but part of the trouble of all the western world" (II.2.259). Here from the outset of the quest, resistance is paramount, and the existence of hope is beside the point, if not entirely inconsequential. Like Galadriel, Elrond identifies their current predicament as yet another iteration of an ongoing, never-ending war against overwhelming evil. The narrator points out that it takes the entire morning for Elrond to give the full context of the history of the One Ring, once again emphasizing Frodo's struggle as the latest example in an ancient chain of defeats. As Samwise "Sam" Gamgee will later wonder, "Don't the great tales never end?" (IV.7.739). The answer appears to be no.

Given their immortal nature, the Elves are aptly positioned to view history as one stream-of-consciousness tale in contrast to the brief viewpoints afforded by the limited lifespans of Men and Hobbits. They can more easily see past any current sense of victory to the long-term consequences, failures, and limitations of those victories. Elrond calls their past victories "fruitless" (II.2.260), though he quickly softens the blow:

Fruitless did I call the victory of the Last Alliance? Not wholly so, yet it did not achieve its end. Sauron was diminished, but not destroyed. His Ring was lost but not unmade. The Dark Tower was broken, but its foundations were not removed. (II.2.261)

While the initial fall of Sauron and Barad-dûr must have seemed to the men of Gondor a titanic achievement worthy of celebration, Elrond's longevity denies him the luxury of complacency. His memory stretches back to Morgoth, the first Dark Lord and Sauron's predecessor.

Inextricable from Elrond and Galadriel's knowledge of the fruitlessness of all earthly victories is their sense of overall decline in the world. The long defeat of Middle-earth extends beyond clashes in battle and to the very nature of Arda. Though Elrond plans for the victory of the Fellowship's quest, he does not pretend that Elves and Men will ever again fully unite as they did in the Last Alliance of

the Second Age: “for Men multiply and the Firstborn decrease, and the two kindreds are estranged. And ever since that day the race of Númenor has decayed” (II.2.261). Crucially, neither Elrond nor Galadriel seem to consider this inevitable decline a valid argument against helping Frodo destroy the Ring. To the contrary, both Elves clearly state their belief that decline will come (and perhaps still more swiftly) even if the Ring is destroyed. As Galadriel says:

Do you not see now wherefore your coming is to us as the footstep of Doom? For if you fail, then we are laid bare to the Enemy. Yet if you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten. (II.7.384)

Failure, loss, and defeat are woven into the fabric of Middle-earth and permeate the experience of the Elves. Elrond, too, speculates that rather than seeing a renewal of Elvish culture and the healing of the world, the destruction of the Ring will result in the corresponding loss of power of the three Elvish rings, “and many fair things will fade and be forgotten” (II.2.286). The courage of the Elves is shown not in the thrilling heroics of their youth in the First Age but in their grim acceptance of the inevitable decline of their people. For them, victory and defeat are one. “Alas for us all!” laments the elf Legolas; “And for all that walk in the world in these after-days. For such is the way of it: to find and lose, as it seems to those whose boat is on the running stream” (II.8.399). It is no coincidence that the image of the city under siege is strongly associated with the Elves, from the strongholds of Gondolin, Doriath, and Nargothrond in *The Silmarillion* to the hidden realms of Rivendell, the “last Homely House east of the sea” (II.1.241), and Lothlórien in *LotR*. The most elf-like of human kingdoms, Númenor and Gondor, likewise betray isolationist and preservationist tendencies, for both good and ill. Though the Elves preach resistance, their brand of resistance may appear passive, especially by the Third Age and from a mortal’s perspective.

Though characters like Gandalf and Aragorn sympathize with the Elvish view of history, their more active roles in the War of the Ring betray slightly different attitudes toward the long defeat. Aragorn’s destiny as the heir of Isildur and returned King of Gondor, and Gandalf’s divinely appointed duty as the enemy of Sauron and unifier of the Free Peoples of Middle-earth, necessitate that their attention be focused on the present conflict. To be sure, neither denies the likelihood of defeat in the short or long term. Gandalf, in particular, is often quick to undercut his good advice with disclaimers. “The Last Debate,” in which the Lords of the West discuss their final strategy, is full of such dark remarks:

“My lords,” said Gandalf, “listen to the words of the Steward of Gondor before he died: *You may triumph on the fields of the Pelennor for a day, but against the Power that has now arisen there is no victory.* I do not bid you despair, as he did, but to ponder the truth in these words [...] This war then is without final hope, as Denethor perceived [...] You have only a choice of evils.” (V.9.912)

Aragorn reiterates Elrond’s sense of worldly decline, but he counters it with a more characteristically human note of hope: “Our days have darkened, and we have dwindled; but ever the Sword has passed to a new keeper” (II.2.265).

Rather than focusing on the melancholy fact of Middle-earth’s decline, Gandalf and Aragorn seem to position the long defeat as a series of successive evils and contextualize the War of the Ring as more of a repetition on an old theme. Shippey notes that “good is attained only at vast expense while evil recuperates almost at will” (*Road* 155); Paul H. Kocher similarly points out that “victory for the good is never automatic. It must be earned anew each time by every individual taking part” (54). It is not that Gandalf does not recognize that evils have come before and will come again—quite the contrary. Rather, as he explains to Frodo, each individual must focus on the evil at hand and decide “what to do with the time that is given [them]” (Tolkien, *LotR* I.2.64). He reiterates this attitude in the last debate, reminding his allies that Sauron is merely “a great evil” and not *the* great evil:

Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule. (V.9.913)

This knowledge of repetition haunts even the most satisfying victories of the Free Peoples of Middle-earth. Éowyn’s defeat of the Witch King, for example, is followed by an enigmatic description of his vanishing spirit as “a voice bodiless and thin that died, and was swallowed up, and was never heard again in that age of this world,” hinting that he may yet be heard in other ages to come (V.6.875). “Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again,” Gandalf warns Frodo early on (I.2.64).

If Gandalf and Aragorn represent an intermediate point between mortal and immortal perspectives on the long defeat, the hobbits provide the most mortal and limited points of view. However, the brevity of their lives and humility of their stature does not lessen the nobility of their attitudes. To the contrary, the hobbits provide some of the most poignant moments of recognition of the long defeat and

their commitment to carry on despite overwhelming odds and near-certain loss and failure. They are even less concerned than Gandalf with the “tides of Time” and the soil of future generations but consequently even more focused on what good they can do in the moment for the world and each other. The hobbits’ moments of existential despair are less philosophical or political and more focused on personal responsibility to their close companions.

Peregrin “Pippin” Took, convinced of Frodo’s death and their certain defeat at the Black Gate, sympathizes with Denethor’s despair and wishes that he and his friend Meriadoc “Merry” Brandybuck could die together “since die [they] must” (V.10.926). He accepts his fate but concludes that he must “do [his] best.” He goes on to slay a troll, a mere footsoldier in Sauron’s overwhelming army, attacking his friend Beregond, a similarly unimportant footsoldier in Aragorn’s army. Though apparently fruitless as any victory mentioned by Elrond, this is the one meaningful, tangible good Pippin can accomplish in this situation. Lacking hope in a larger or more consequential victory, Pippin is ready to sacrifice himself for his friend, doing what he can at his own level.

A similar sense of imperative duty to one’s fellowship accompanies Sam’s attitudes throughout *LotR*. His growing awareness of his role in the ongoing saga of Middle-earth brings a somewhat larger perspective, but the lesson Sam takes from the great tales only reaffirms his hobbitish persistence: “We hear about those as just went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end” (IV.8.739). Sam realizes here that going on despite a bad end is a better story, from both a literary and a personal perspective. This is a hard lesson to live out, but one that returns to him at the end of his wits and his hope, with Frodo seemingly killed: “‘What am I to do then?’ he cried again, and now he seemed plainly to know the hard answer: *see it through*” (III.10.759). As his hope dwindles, his resolve to “see it through” grows even stronger. He berates himself internally: “You are the fool, going on hoping and toiling. You could have lain down and gone to sleep together days ago, if you hadn’t been so dogged. But you’ll die just the same, or worse” (VI.3.974). Sam, like Gandalf, does not argue with the logic of these thoughts but merely reaffirms his personal commitment to Frodo—“I’ll carry Mr. Frodo up myself, if it breaks my back and heart”—and tells himself to “stop arguing!” This doggedness in the face of hopelessness unites Sam with Gandalf and the Elves, though each approaches their situation from different angles.

Frodo, in the end, demonstrates the truism Tolkien touched upon in his letter, that “‘victors’ never can enjoy ‘victory’” (*Letters* 235). Even after the defeat of Sauron, the destruction of the Ring, and the Scouring of the Shire, personal victory for Frodo proves hollow. Part of the long defeat is that there can be no victory, even a temporary one, without devastating sacrifice. Some, like Boromir, Theoden, and Gollum, literally lose their lives, but in his way so does Frodo. “It

must often be so,” Frodo tells Sam at the bittersweet end of the story, “when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them” (VI.9.1067). In this way Frodo, who started with that most hobbitish motivation of trying to “save the Shire” and his friends, comes full circle to the Elvish acceptance of inevitable decline and loss even after apparent victory. As he sets off for the Undying Lands, he seems to understand the long defeat from an almost Elvish point of view. Regardless of their respective points of view, all the heroes of *LotR* find that, in the struggle against the long defeat, “hope and despair are akin” (V.9.914).

“WE’LL KEEP FIGHTIN’ IT UNTIL WE WHOOP IT”: ANGEL’S PERENNIAL CHAMPIONS OF THE ETERNAL HOPELESS

“When the chips are down, and you're at the end of your rope, you need someone that you can count on” (“Hero”). These words, diegetically penned by Cordelia “Cordy” Chase (Charisma Carpenter) and read by human-demon hybrid Doyle (Glenn Quinn) for a never-aired commercial promoting Angel Investigations (AI), offer a concise description of the overall theme of the television series *Angel*. Co-created by Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt in 1999 as a spinoff of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* follows the journey of its eponymous vampire-with-a-soul and his companions on a mission to “help the hopeless.”¹ Throughout the series, Angel (David Boreanaz) and his team strive to be the ones on whom the hopeless can count, at times themselves—individually and collectively—needing the very kind of help they offer others. As the series continues and the stakes increase, metaphorically and literally, it becomes clear that there is no end to either hopelessness or helplessness: there are always more people who need hope, and champions like Angel must continually choose to help them. In “I Will Remember You,” Angel tells Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Geller) more demons will follow the Mohra demon they are chasing, to which the Slayer responds, “They always come, and they always will”; likewise, several seasons later, Winifred “Fred” Burkle (Amy Acker) expresses the champion’s response to impending evil, saying, “[W]e’ll fight it and we’ll keep fightin’ it until we whoop it” (“Offspring”). While demonic evil constitutes a significant source of suffering and despair in the Buffyverse, the persistent and repeated choice of Angel and his team to oppose such evil and offer “hope to the hopeless” provides an analog to Tolkien’s concept of fighting the long defeat.

¹ Introduced in “I Fall to Pieces,” the AI motto later becomes “We help the helpless” (“Parting Gifts”) with no explanation for the change, though the “hopeless” version is still heard occasionally via Cordy’s outgoing answering machine message after that (“She”; “Reprise”). It is never stated in *Angel* who coined the motto, but in the non-canonical novel *Bruja*, Cordy claims she made it up (Odom 31).

Unlike Tolkien, whose ideas were rooted in his Catholic beliefs, Whedon's version of the long defeat stems from his existentialist leanings. As J. Michael Richardson and J. Douglas Rabb argue, in the Buffyverse "Whedon is defending a radical existential ethics" (*Existential Joss Whedon* 4) in which "[f]reedom consists in the force and power not to admit evil into the world" (12). This concept of freedom, as conceived by Russian philosopher Lev Shestov, is based on the idea that acceding to the laws of reason "limit[s] our freedom and bring[s] evil into the world," because reason forces one to choose between good and evil, whereas prior to the existence of reason—i.e., before Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge—evil did not exist (12-13). According to this view, true existential freedom allows for contradiction and paradox, and moral choice becomes something other than a utilitarian calculation between good and bad or the lesser of two evils (50). In other words, the ethical choice is sometimes the one that unreasonably and illogically disallows evil altogether. Such choices often include an element of self-sacrifice (70). One example of such a choice is when Angel asks the Oracles to turn back time, erasing his day as a human (a condition resulting from contact with the Mohra demon's blood) and forgoing his opportunity to experience true happiness in order to stop the Mohra demon. The paradox here is that the Oracles acquiesce to rewinding time by one day, but Angel still remembers the original day, along with the knowledge of his briefly regained humanity, allowing him to use what he learned to defeat the Mohra ("I Will Remember You"). In other words, through an illogical and paradoxical choice, Angel prevents evil from entering—or at least remaining in—the world.

The existential freedom to combat evil provides a basis for understanding the long defeat as it applies to *Angel*. Indeed, the modified form of the AI motto, "We help the helpless," highlights the paradoxical ethics under which the protagonists operate. In one sense, to be helpless means simply to be without help, and choosing to help may be rational or not, depending on the context. However, "helpless" can also mean that no amount or type of help is sufficient to improve someone's circumstances; in such cases, the decision to help is always irrational. In *Angel*, the latter situation is more common than the former given the often supernatural roots of the problems victims face, and the lack of sufficient help is the primary cause of their hopelessness. Nevertheless, the AI team time and again makes the choice to help the helpless, despite the objective irrationality of such a choice. In making such a choice, a champion becomes an "authentic individual," i.e., "one who makes autonomous choices despite operant sources of displacement, develops a form of personal agency, and thereby [...] shapes her own identity" (Foy and Kowalski 158), thus eschewing a life of Sartrean "bad faith" (161). Because in the Buffyverse "heroism is not defined as a grand quest to eliminate evil, but rather an existential determination to fight it" (Wall and Zryd 59), the continuous

reaffirmation of the AI team's choice to help the helpless constitutes a battle against the long defeat.

Thus, fighting the long defeat is itself a form of existential discovery and definition, allowing individuals the opportunity to develop their authentic selves through the recurrent decision to oppose evil, even and especially in the face of irrational options and insurmountable odds. Such a fight is effectively a struggle of "the utopian impulse against the dystopian reality, or [...] as hope versus despair" (Jewett 76). As an existential struggle, fighting the long defeat is also an intensely personal battle, since "[n]othing can tell you what to do—not rules, not reason, not society, not church, not even divine authority. And nothing relieves you of the responsibility for your choices" (*Existential Joss Whedon* 4). At a personal level, the long defeat of *Angel* is tied to the common Whedonverse theme of combating loneliness through the connection of a chosen family (Jarvis and Burr, generally). Whedon has said *Angel* is "centered around [...] the complete aloneness of every individual and how in the black, bleak, horrible and all-encompassing despair of the world we manage to make connections with each other" ("City Of" commentary). Building and maintaining such connections with others is critical for persevering against evil.

The importance of connection is reinforced throughout the series, but it is most compactly exhibited in the first half of Season 1, during which each of the major characters undergoes experiences that help them realize their own need to connect. Doyle initially explains the importance of connection when Angel doubts the need for help with his mission:

It's not all about fighting and gadgets and stuff. It's about reaching out to people, showing them that there's love and hope still left in the world. [...] It's about letting them into your heart. It's not about saving lives; it's about saving souls. Hey, possibly your own in the process. ("City Of")

Although Doyle counsels Angel on the need for connection, he ironically seems unaware of a similar need of his own. He is therefore surprised when Angel conscripts him into service to help find the rich and powerful vampire Russell Winters (Vyto Ruginis) who preys on young women hoping to make it in the entertainment industry: "I'm not combat ready," Doyle objects; "I'm just the messenger!" Doyle nonetheless helps Angel track down Russell, and after initially intending to flee, he even puts his own life at risk by attempting to crash through the gates when Angel fails to return from Russell's mansion in the allotted time ("City Of"). Likewise, when Wesley Wyndham-Pryce (Alexis Denisof) shows up in L.A. as a "rogue demon hunter" newly dismissed from the Watcher's Council ("Parting Gifts"), he nominally maintains his independence, but nevertheless visits the AI office frequently to, in Cordelia's words, "compare skinnies on the current

evil happenings” (“Somnambulist”) and fight the occasional demon, until Angel eventually offers him a job (“She”). Cordy reaches a similar point of realization when, after recovering from her accelerated pregnancy with Haxil demon spawn, she tells Angel and Wesley, “I learned that I have two people I trust absolutely with my life—and that part’s new” (“Expecting”). All of these examples establish the importance of making an individual decision to fight the long defeat and of choosing a family—or fellowship—of others to provide support.

The importance of connection and fellowship is demonstrated by negative examples as well. Detective Kate Lockley (Elisabeth Röhm) is an occasional ally to Angel, but her inability to develop meaningful connections ultimately leads her to despair and abandon the fight. When Kate first meets Angel at a singles bar, she tells him she is “just trying to make a connection”; the next night, she accuses him of being a serial killer in a way that reveals her own attachment issues: “It’s frustrating, isn’t it, not being able to connect, to love like other people” (“Lonely Hearts”). After helping Angel stop an LAPD precinct captain who raises zombie cops to crack down on violent crime (“The Thin Dead Line”), Kate is placed on suspension, prompting her to attempt suicide via overdose (“Reprise”). Angel successfully revives her, but her excision from her chosen family leads her to lament, “If I’m not part of the force, it’s like nothing I do means anything” (“Epiphany”). Despite her expulsion from the police force, Kate still expresses a vague belief that “maybe [they]’re not alone in this” fight against evil, but her inability to maintain a connection with Angel and the AI team ultimately results in a personal failure.

The starkest example of how a loss of connection leads to failure in the fight against the long defeat is Wesley’s betrayal in Season 3 and his subsequent descent into the lone-wolf phase of his character arc. Believing Angel will fulfill a false prophecy by killing his infant son Connor (Jake and Trenton Tupen; later Vincent Kartheiser), Wesley conspires with the vampire hunter Daniel Holtz (Keith Szarabajka) to kidnap Connor in an effort to protect the baby. In doing so, Wesley betrays his AI colleagues, only to be betrayed in turn by one of Holtz’s “Angel-Hunters” who takes Connor and leaves Wesley for dead (“Sleep Tight”). Wesley’s actions are rational based on the information he has at hand, a point that Lorne (Andy Hallett) tries to explain to Angel (“Forgiving”), but his utilitarian judgment turns out to be an ethical miscalculation that leads to the fracturing of AI and causes many subsequent problems. Previously, in *Buffy*, Wesley used a similar utilitarian calculus when he argued against exchanging a magical box for a kidnapped Willow Rosenberg (Alyson Hannigan), given the potential harm the box could cause; however, Daniel “Oz” Osbourne (Seth Green) nullified the debate by smashing an artefact that could destroy the box, forcing the Scooby Gang to take the only course of action left to them, i.e., trade the box for Willow (“Choices”). In each of these cases, Wesley’s ethical decision-making process is entrenched in his dedication to

knowledge and rationality, which according to Shestovian ethics inhibits his existential freedom and prevents him from making morally good choices (*Existential Joss Whedon* 50-51).

Cut off from his fellowship, Wesley slides into a lonely existence in which he continues to make rationally justifiable but ethically questionable decisions, such as “banging the enemy and keeping [a] slave-girl in his closet” (“Deep Down”)—the rational justification being that he is using both women to further his twisted mission against evil. When Charles Gunn (J. August Richards) calls out Wesley for helping Fred open a portal in an attempt to kill the professor who sent her to the demon dimension of Pylea (“Supersymmetry”), the conversation heats up and Gunn asks, “What happened to you, man?”; Wesley responds, “I had my throat cut and all my friends abandoned me” (“Spin the Bottle”), acknowledging the effect of his solitude while belying his responsibility for the choices that led to his isolation—essentially operating in Sartrean bad faith. Wesley eventually receives Angel’s forgiveness for kidnapping Connor (“Ground State”) and later decides to return to AI (“Habeas Corpses”); however, it takes a while for the full damage of his decisions to manifest, and tensions with Gunn remain high for some time.

Although each individual’s decision to fight the long defeat is personal, a recurring theme of *Angel* is that the fight is necessary for the redemption of past evils. In establishing the premise of the show, Doyle describes Angel as someone who wants “[t]o fight evil—and atone for his crimes,” later acknowledging his own need for redemption with the admission, “We all got something to atone for” (“City Of”). Even if “[f]reedom consists in the force and power not to admit evil into the world,” the reality is that such freedom exists only for those who recognize it and seek it out. Whedonverse champions are “atypical and heroic figures” because “taking responsibility for authentically determining our own values and goals is rare” (Foy and Kowalski 160). But many people never achieve this level of authenticity, and those who do nonetheless make many poor choices (i.e., allow evil into the world) before they reach it. After Angel fires Cordelia, Wesley, and Gunn for criticizing his decision to let Darla (Julie Benz) and Drusilla (Juliet Landau) feast on a room full of lawyers (“Reunion”), he tries to take down Wolfram & Hart at its hellish source, only to discover that the evil, interdimensional law firm’s “Home Office” is in fact on Earth. This revelation drives Angel to despondency, leading him to sleep with Darla so he can “feel something besides the cold,” the effect of which (in addition to conceiving Connor) is an epiphany that he later shares with Kate:

In the greater scheme or the big picture, nothing we do matters. There’s no grand plan, no big win. [...] If there is no great glorious end to all this, if nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do ’cause that’s all

there is. What we do, now, today. I fought for so long—for redemption, for a reward—finally just to beat the other guy, but I never got it. [...] All I wanna do is help. I wanna help because I don't think people should suffer as they do. Because, if there is no bigger meaning, then the smallest act of kindness is the greatest thing in the world. ("Epiphany")

This depiction of the fight against the long defeat contrasts with Holland Manners's (Sam Anderson) claim that "there is no fight" because evil is "in the hearts and minds of every single living being,"² and therefore, Wolfram & Hart "ha[s] no intention of doing anything so prosaic as 'winning'" ("Reprise"). Thus, the very fight against the long defeat itself is paradoxically one-sided; those on the side of good are, as Tolkien described, "ever-defeated never altogether subdued" (*Letters* 89), but neither can they ever completely subdue evil. Furthermore, since "heroism is not defined as a grand quest to eliminate evil, but rather an existential determination to fight it" (Wall and Zryd 59), the act of fighting evil, of hampering and possibly preventing its entrance into the world, is itself a form of victory over evil. This is why Whedon views the very end of the series—in which Los Angeles is plunged into Hell by Wolfram & Hart, and Angel and the remaining members of his team (Spike [James Marsters], Gunn, and Illyria [Amy Acker]) are seemingly the only ones left to fight the legion of demons ravaging the city ("Not Fade Away")—as a final statement rather than a cliffhanger, because "[r]edemption is something you fight for every day, so I wanted [Angel] to go out fighting" (Robinson). Angel's final words of the series, "Let's go to work," uttered just before he swings his sword at an onrushing demon horde, punctuates the notion that the fight is not over and never will be.

"DYING WITH THEIR BACKS TO THE WALL": FINDING RESONANCES IN FIGHTING THE LONG DEFEAT

Heretofore, Tolkienian and Whedonesque conceptions of the long defeat have been kept largely separate, but bringing some of these examples together shows how well they correspond. For example, Angel's final words of the series, spoken shortly after he learns that Wesley has been killed, resonate with Sam's determination to "see it through" in the face of Frodo's seeming death—amongst overwhelmingly hopeless circumstances for both characters. Despite divergent philosophical and spiritual perspectives—Tolkien's expectant Catholicism and Whedon's existential atheism—we find such resonances to be copious and significant, leading to the conclusion that a more fundamental expression of the human condition undergirds these (sub-)creators' notions of the long defeat.

² As Tolkien writes in "Mythopoeia": "and of Evil this / alone is dreadly certain: Evil is" (99).

Foremost is the idea that evil is an ever-present force. Galadriel and Elrond describe their own ages-long perspectives of the fight against the long defeat as an ongoing struggle, renewed in kind if not necessarily intensity. “You will learn that your trouble is but part of the trouble of all the western world,” Elrond tells Glóin—and, obliquely, his entire council—indicating even parochial and temporal evils are symptoms of a deeper disease (II.2.259). But one need not be a millennia-old Elf, or even a centuries-old vampire, to see such patterns. As Buffy says, “[More demons] always come, and they always will” (“I Will Remember You”). Likewise, Holland Manners claims Wolfram & Hart, the corporate representative of evil on Earth and in other dimensions, “has always been here, in one form or another” because it “is in the hearts and minds of every single living being” (“Reprise”). In both Arda and the Buffyverse, the persistent nature of evil is a fact of existence.

Because of this persistent evil, the fight against it must also be persistent. As Kocher notes, “victory for the good [...] must be earned anew each time by every individual taking part” (54), which is why Gandalf tells Frodo every person must decide “what to do with the time that is given [them]” (*LotR* I.2.64). It is not up to the Free Peoples “to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in [them] for the succor of those years wherein [they] are set” (V.9.913). Likewise, for champions like Angel, “heroism is not defined as a grand quest to eliminate evil, but rather an existential determination to fight it” (Wall and Zryd 59)—even when that determination is hopeless or irrational. Elrond’s claim that the only way forward is “to resist, with hope or without it” (II.2.259) is in line with Jewett’s description of the fight in *Angel* as “the utopian impulse against the dystopian reality, [...] as hope versus despair” (76).

Not only are evil and the fight against it both persistent, but they play out on multiple levels. There are, of course, the epic struggles: Aragorn and his army walking “open-eyed into [a] trap, with courage, but small hope for ourselves” (V.9.914); Angel and his ragtag remainders facing the legions of Hell with the simplest of battle plans, “We fight” (“Not Fade Away”). Just as important as the big battles are the small skirmishes, such as Pippin saving Beregon from a troll, or Angel’s epiphany that “the smallest act of kindness is the greatest thing in the world.” Success in the fight against the long defeat is not determined by the size of the enemy defeated nor by the number of people saved, but by the principled decision to thwart evil wherever one encounters it, no matter how insignificant the situation seems.

This includes the decision to fight even at the risk of one’s own happiness, health, and life. Sacrifice is often necessary in the fight against the long defeat, and self-sacrifice is the epitome of an individual’s resolution to oppose evil. There are plenty of examples of those who give up their lives to save others throughout both *LotR* and *Angel*: Boromir, Doyle, Theoden, and Wesley, among others. Added to these are many other sacrifices. For example, Frodo sets out to save the Shire—and

indeed, all of Middle-earth—but there is no place for him there after his exposure to the One Ring and the sinister will of its Lord. Likewise, Angel passes up multiple opportunities to live a happy life, or something close to it: first, when he destroys the Gem of Amara, which would have given him immunity to all of the usual vulnerabilities of a vampire (“In the Dark”); again when he asks the Oracles to turn back time by a day, erasing the effect of the Mohra demon’s blood in making him human again (“I Will Remember You”). For some, the sacrifice is a long, drawn-out process rather than a one-time decision, such as Galadriel’s pronouncement that Frodo’s arrival is “as the footstep of Doom,” the result of which is that Elves will thenceforth “dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten” (II.7.384). These examples all show that a willingness to put oneself at risk is a critical component of resolving to fight the long defeat.

Given the persistent and sacrificial nature of the long defeat, it may seem like the fight is hopeless, but the silver lining is that the fight need not be undertaken in solitude. From the beginning of his journey, Frodo is accompanied by close friends, despite his initial desire to sneak away alone, and the relationship with his closest friend bears him—literally, at one point—through to the end. Along the way, many other friendships and alliances are forged: Legolas and Gimli; Merry and Éowyn; Pippin and Beregon. For the AI team, the fight itself is about making connections, about finding “someone that you can count on” and “reaching out to people, showing them that there’s love and hope still left in the world” (“City Of”). Both of these tales are at heart about, in the words of Whedon, “how in the black, bleak, horrible and all-encompassing despair of the world we manage to make connections with each other” (“City Of” commentary).

In closing, all of these resonances demonstrate clearly that, despite the different worldviews in which these creators are working, there nevertheless seems to be an agreement in their creations about the importance of actively opposing evil. Tolkien may believe in a divine “final victory,” while Whedon may hold a view akin to Gunn’s that the “last shot always comes up a question mark” (“Inside Out”). Whichever view holds out in the end, the attitudes and actions necessary to challenge evil remain the same, and both conceptions of the long defeat seem to concur with Tolkien’s view that one should “by all means esteem the old heroes: men caught in the chains of circumstance or of their own character, torn between duties equally sacred, dying with their backs to the wall” (“*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” 17).

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