

“What Did You Sing About?”: Acts of Questioning in “Once More, with Feeling”

"Am I crazy? Am I dreamin'? Am I marrying a demon?" Where else but on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* could these questions not only be posed but sung as "a retro pastiche" (6.7)? Questions abound in "Once More, with Feeling"—the answers, however, are a little less forthcoming, as I will outline in this paper. Commentary on *Buffy's* musical episode often focuses on the revelations of truth that form the content of the songs.¹ Richard Albright aptly synthesizes this view when he states, "We soon realize that each of the characters sings what they secretly feel, so the songs represent the real and the true" (para. 11). Or, as Anne Billson puts it, the characters are "compelled to blurt out their innermost secrets in song" (110). I disagree—in part. That is, the truths or secrets revealed in "Once More, with Feeling" may be a distraction from other truths or secrets that the characters are not yet able to admit aloud, even in song, even to themselves. If, as Rhonda Wilcox notes, the musical device of the episode "works like a *soliloquy*, in that we can be assured we will hear the interior truth for that character," then another aspect of the soliloquy should be considered (193; my emphasis).² Anthony J. Gilbert argues that the speaker of a soliloquy "may say what he wants to believe is true, at a conscious level, but which he knows to be false, at an unconscious level" (223). The speaker of a soliloquy, he argues, "is engaged in a dialogue with the self that reveals and conceals truth" (222).³ My argument in *this* paper is that acts of questioning in "Once More, with Feeling" similarly work both to reveal and conceal truth. The spoken words (even when delivered in song) may reveal one truth, but they arguably conceal another, more important truth. In this sense, they gesture toward a temporarily *unspeakable* truth or secret implied in effects of rhetorical questions.

The first questions asked in "Once More, with Feeling" are Buffy's in the opening song "Going Through the Motions": "Will I stay this way forever? Sleepwalk through my life's endeavor?" In terms of the truth Buffy is revealing, these questions act as statements of fear that she is doomed to walk mechanically through life for years to come.⁴ This truth leads Buffy to the realization "I don't want to be going through the motions [...] I just want to be alive." But this is not her only, or most important truth. Her rhetorical questions and implied assertions simultaneously lead to another *unspeakable* truth—not that she wants to be *alive* (as the final word of the song emphasizes with its extended note) but that she wishes she were still dead.⁵ After all, the song—an upbeat "pure Disney number," as Joss Whedon has referred to it—may, in and of itself, be an example of Buffy merely going through the motions, trying to convince herself and her audience⁶ that she wants to be alive when, in fact, she doesn't (Ruditis 76). She is, as Anne Billson says, "trapped in a state of post-resurrection depression" (112). *Will I stay this way forever? Sleepwalk through my life's endeavor?*—these are rhetorical questions; they make assertions and imply a response without soliciting an answer.⁷ The overt implied assertion is *yes*, but the alternative, covert response is *no*. That is, if she were to die again, she would be freed from the tedium of her post-resurrection depression and her life's endeavor.⁸

At the Magic Box the following morning, in response to Giles's question "What did you sing about?" Buffy responds, "I don't remember." This, by all appearances, is an outright lie given that the others remember what they sang. Anya, for example, claims, "Xander and I were fighting about Monkey Trouble," and Dawn says she sang about math. Richard Albright believes that Buffy lies to the other Scoobies because she "wants to spare their feelings" (para. 12). But I wonder whether Buffy, in fact, *does* forget—simply in the sense that she's not paying attention to her own song lyrics or clichéd sentiments. After all, she could have said, "I sang about slaying" (or vampires, or whatever), but instead she claims she doesn't remember—a claim that could

(*should* even) raise the suspicions of the other Scoobies rather than work to spare their feelings. I offer this as a possibility because a similar disjuncture between the lyrics and Buffy's apparent memory of them occurs in the same scene after the Scoobies sing "I've Got a Theory." Having heard the others sing out theories ranging from demons to bunnies, Buffy sings, "It doesn't matter. What can't we face if we're together?" Yet immediately after the song Buffy asks, "So what is it? What's causing it?" to which Giles replies, "I thought it didn't matter." *He* heard what she sang, but did *she* hear it? And if she did hear it, perhaps she doesn't care what she sang. Perhaps her lyrical sentiments in "I've Got a Theory" are yet another example of going through the motions, albeit in clichéd song lyrics—that is, Buffy sings about facing dangers *together* simply because that is what she believes the Scoobies expect her to say.

Buffy's words of confidence—her *apparent* truth of faith in togetherness—is not so confident or truthful when viewed rhetorically. That is, Buffy doesn't actually *state* that all will be well in her portion of "I've Got a Theory"; instead, she asks rhetorical questions that overtly imply togetherness, while covertly gesturing toward her ongoing separation from the group⁹: "What can't we face if we're together? What's in this place that we can't weather?" The implied answer to these questions is "nothing" (except for bunnies).¹⁰ The truth, however, is that Buffy has faced both death and resurrection alone. So, while the others offer up a variety of possible theories, Buffy asks questions that act as assertions and, thereby, negate all but one implied response. As one rhetorical theorist explains, "the speaker of a rhetorical question does not expect the hearer to answer, and what is more, he would in certain situations not even want the hearer to answer for fear of not getting the answer that is in accordance with the presupposed truth..." (Anthanasidou 117). If Buffy were to speak a truthful answer to these questions—an answer currently unspeakable to her—that answer would be her resurrected *life*.¹¹ As Anne Billson argues with regard to Season Six, "life itself" is "the Big Bad" (111).

A similar effect with regard to Buffy's questions occurs in the context of Giles's song "Standing," in which he admits he is standing in Buffy's way of progressing through life. Prior to the song, Giles asks, "Have you spoken with Dawn at all about the incident at Halloween?" This is a simple yes-no question to which Buffy responds neither yes nor no, but instead says, "I thought you took care of that." Giles responds, "Right," and Buffy asks, "What would I do without you?" To Buffy, this question is rhetorical—she doesn't expect an answer from Giles because she doesn't expect Giles to leave. Indeed, she has already stated this at the end of "Life Serial" when she says to Giles, "It makes me feel safe knowing you're always gonna be here" (6.5). Giles's departure, to Buffy, is unthinkable; the choice of a rhetorical question allows her to circumvent a response and avoid the possibility of his absence. Simultaneously, it allows her to avoid acknowledging that she needs—perhaps even desires—the chance to make her own choices about life or death without interference from a father figure or, indeed, from anyone.

To Giles, however, Buffy's question incites his song about his need to leave—he speaks the very truth Buffy is unwilling to face. Buffy's response to Giles's song is yet another question that works to avoid this truth: "Did you just say something?" she asks him immediately after his song. This response does not correspond to the parameters of lyrical comprehension established elsewhere in the episode. That is, several characters acknowledge that they heard and understood lyrics sung by someone else. As I already noted, Giles heard Buffy when she sang "It doesn't matter." Likewise, when Xander and Anya talk to Giles in the street scene,¹² Xander says to Anya, "My eyes are not beady!" and Anya says, "My toes are not hairy." Clearly, they heard each other when singing "I'll Never Tell." And Buffy hears Spike's lyrics in "Rest in Peace," later saying to him, "I thought you wanted me to stay away from you. Isn't that what you sang?" Buffy's apparent inability to hear the lyrics of "Standing," arguably, represents a moment of

subconscious resistance to a temporarily unspeakable truth. She does not want—is not *yet* ready—to hear or speak truthful answers to the questions she poses.

Similarly, I would argue that at a subconscious level Tara does not want a response to the question she poses to Willow in "Under Your Spell": "I'm under your spell. How else can it be anyone would notice me?"¹³ This question suggests insecurity on Tara's part—the implied assertion is that no one would find her attractive if not for Willow's love. This insecurity is emphasized immediately before her song when Tara expresses surprise to the fact that some boys were checking her out: "I know exactly what they see in me," Tara says to Willow. "*You.*" Tara is not yet ready to recognize consciously the danger in a dynamic that pairs her insecurity with her lover's desire for power or control over her. The statement "I'm under your spell" and the rhetorical question posed immediately thereafter point to the metaphorical magic of Willow and Tara's love (a conceit used throughout the series in the development of their relationship). Notably, in the original script, an additional question is posed. Instead of "I'm under your spell," the *script* lyrics ask, "*Am I under your spell?*" Although the scripted question is not asked aloud in the episode itself, I believe it remains the concealed question that Tara cannot bring herself to speak aloud. Tara cannot ask Willow, "Am I under your spell?" because if Willow were to answer honestly the metaphor would break down in the face of a literal answer: *yes*.¹⁴ Thus, within the metaphorical context, Tara poses a rhetorical question—*How else can it be anyone would notice me?*—one that structurally negates a literal, truthful response from Willow and thereby works to maintain the metaphorical lie of perfect love.¹⁵ Later, when Tara discovers that she *is* under a literal spell, she asks in song, "God, how can this be, playing with my memory? [...] Willow, don't you see? There'll be nothing left of me." In asking *these* questions, Tara is able to speak the formerly unspeakable truth, acknowledging that the person she loves has consumed a portion of her memory—just as Glory had done. By the next episode, Tara will

confront Willow directly with similar questions and, shortly thereafter, remove herself from Willow's abuse of power.

The questions in Anya and Xander's song "I'll Never Tell" also work to reveal and conceal relationship dynamics. The lyrics reveal fears about aging and success, but the real problem—the couple's inability to communicate—is revealed in the rhetorical structure.¹⁶ Even before the song begins, their communication strategy becomes evident in their first exchange: Xander asks, "You want some breakfast, baby?"; Anya responds not with a simple yes or no but by asking, "You don't have to get to work?" Likewise, when Xander asks, "So, waffles?" Anya responds, "Will you still make me waffles when we're married?" On one level, Anya's question reveals fears about marriage—fears that are also expressed in the song. On a rhetorical level, her lack of direct response to Xander's questions—the fact that she responds to both questions not with an answer but with another question—suggests that she is more interested in her own concerns than in giving him the responses he needs. The same scenario is played out in their song. Xander asks, "Is she looking for a pot of gold?" and "Will our lives become too stressful if I'm never that successful?" Anya asks, "Will I look good when I've gotten old?" He's concerned about financial failure; she's concerned about her beauty failing. Although they *hear* each other, neither of them listens to the other or attempts to answer the questions posed. "Am I crazy?" "Am I dreamin'?" "Am I marrying a demon?" The answers?—*no* you're not crazy, *no* you're not dreaming, but *yes*, Xander, you very well might be marrying a demon.¹⁷ The problem is not that they'll *never tell* (indeed, they *are* telling throughout the song); the problem is their lack of ability to answer even the most obvious of questions.

Dawn also uses rhetorical questions that ask one thing but structurally and contextually imply something else. Notably, she waits until she is alone to ask, "Does anybody even notice? Does anybody even care?" She sings these questions to her own reflection in the mirror. They

are rhetorical in that the answer is implied. Her *revealed* truth or assertion is that she fears no one cares about her. However, her choice to pose rhetorical questions sabotages the possibility of response. In that sense, she is enabling the very thing she claims to fear. Moreover, this fear is not logical given the context. Her sister gave up her life for her and, thereafter, the entire Scooby gang has worked to look after her.¹⁸ Dawn *must* negate response through rhetorical questions because if she were actually to ask someone these questions, the answer would be *yes*. The concealed fear, the unspeakable fear, is something else entirely—something she distracts herself from by focusing on the revealed fear. My suggestion would be that she fears Buffy will die again.¹⁹ This fear is certainly not unfounded; indeed, in "Bargaining Part II" Dawn finds Buffy about to leap from Glory's tower: "Don't jump, Buffy!" Dawn pleads. "Don't move! [...] Please! [...] We were up here together and then you went away. You don't want to do that again" (6.2). Dawn witnesses this possibility yet again when Buffy confronts Sweet: "Deal's this," Buffy tells him, "I can't kill you, you take me to Hellsville in her place." Buffy thus offers to sacrifice herself for Dawn *again*. Dawn needs to acknowledge that *losing Buffy* is her fear—that the problem is not a *lack* of caring but *excessive* caring evident in Buffy's self-sacrifice and, moreover, that perhaps she, Dawn, believes herself to be unworthy of such sacrifice.²⁰

For her part, Buffy shows, once again, how much she cares for Dawn in this offer; simultaneously, she shows how little she cares for her own life. Indeed, when Sweet asks, "What if I kill you?" Buffy responds, "Trust me. It won't help." Thus she makes a joke of the very thing for which she may well be hoping. Just prior to this scene, in "Walk Through the Fire" Buffy asks, "Why can't I feel?" Her reason for walking through the fire is phrased as a question: "Where else can I turn?" On one level, this is a rhetorical question that asserts she has no choice other than to walk through the metaphorical fire toward her sister. On another, this is an information question, the answer to which is *away*—that is, in the other direction, away from her

responsibilities as the Slayer. But she cannot bring herself to speak this possibility—to *consciously* admit that she doesn't want this life. By all appearances, walking through the fire toward Dawn is an affirmation of her life's endeavor, but as we've just seen, the opposite is true. Her willingness to sacrifice herself, yet again, for Dawn is a confirmation of her death wish.

"Walk Through the Fire" contains several other questions posed by various characters. Giles asks, "Will this do a thing to change her? Am I leaving Dawn in danger? Is my Slayer too far gone to care?" Xander asks, "What if Buffy can't defeat it?" And Tara asks, in an echo from an earlier song, "What can't we face if we're together?" Certainly, each of these questions asserts a fear. But structurally the questions, posed in close succession, suggest that each of these characters is so preoccupied with his or her own questions that none of them responds to the questions posed by another. Moreover, the succession quickens the pace—everyone gestures toward an unspeakable truth that the *literal* monsters of Sunnydale are not the main problem. The danger is that the Scooby gang is at risk of falling apart; the unspeakable truth may be that this breakdown is a current, albeit temporary, necessity. Each character is about to face life on his or her own. Is it any surprise that the final song emphasizes a question (through title and lyrics): "Where Do We Go From Here?"²¹

When the demon, Sweet, sings, "Why'd you run away? Don't you like my style?" he instantly changes his suit colour, thereby distracting the audience from another possible implication of this question. "Style" does not necessarily refer only to his visual aesthetic but arguably to rhetorical style—and the effects thereof on each singer.²² "I come from the imagination and I'm here strictly by your invocation. So what'd you say? Why don't we dance a while?" Even under Sweet's influence, the characters cannot *say* what they cannot yet face. They can, however, dance themselves to death by refusing to recognize their unspoken truths. Notably, it is not the spoken admission of her revealed truth that stops Buffy from combusting; it's the

unspoken acknowledgment of her secret death wish. That is, Buffy reveals one secret when she admits to everyone that she was pulled from heaven; however, this cannot be the truth that stops her frantic dance, given that the dance occurs *after* she admits she was in heaven. Buffy survives because Spike convinces her that she has to go on living, and Dawn reminds her, "The hardest thing in this world is to live in it." These words—Buffy's own words to Dawn from "The Gift"—trigger Buffy's recognition of her unspeakable truth: she has been courting death. And just as she rescued Dawn from death, Dawn now rescues her.

I often wondered why Sweet says in his final reprise, "[...] there's not a one who can say this ended well." *Why?* I wondered—after all, they've won *this* battle. But now I think that the answer is in Sweet's next lines: "All those secrets you've been concealing. Say you're happy now—once more, with feeling." In their songs, the characters have been *concealing* secrets, not merely revealing them. *Say you're happy now* (even though you're still not) and repeat it, with feeling, in order to convince yourself of its truth. In other words, the songs are a façade of truth behind which lie other truths. The questions the characters ask throughout the episode allow them to approach these unspeakable truths; this, in turn, allows the audience to glimpse individual expressions of truth that will gradually be spoken throughout Season Six.²³ "When does 'the end' appear? When do the trumpets cheer?" the group asks in the final few lines of the final song. The questions must continue because they point the way toward answers.²⁴ The alternative would be for the questioning to stop and the answers never to be recognized, and the Whedonverse has already provided us a vision of that scenario: In "Shiny Happy People," Fred, speaking to Angel, hinting at her concerns about Jasmine asks, "But have you noticed how we all just kind of do what she says, don't ask questions?" Angel responds, "Isn't it a relief? Constant questioning. It's finally over" (A4.18). Well, we all know where *that* leads.

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1 Joss Whedon himself, as quoted in the script book to "Once More, with Feeling," says "I knew that this would be the episode where Buffy told her friends that she'd been in Heaven and all the other truths would come out" (Ruditis 64).

2 This comparison of the songs in "Once More, with Feeling" to soliloquies is one that I had thought of even before reading Wilcox's point in *Why Buffy Matters* or its related footnote to a lecture by Diana Sandars. At the time of writing this essay, I had neither heard nor was able to attain a copy of Diana Sandars' lecture. I apologize for any inadvertent duplication of ideas on the comparison of the songs with soliloquies.

3 The speaker, thus, is engaged in a "paradox of utterance" (Gilbert 223).

4 As Richard Albright says, "This song actually provides a rare opportunity for a direct view of Buffy's inner feelings" (11).

5 Buffy jokes about this to Xander in "Life Serial" (6.5): "You saved me from having to accept Giles's offer to work at the Magic Box. I mean, retail? I'd rather be dead...again." A joke, however, is not the same as making an outright admission. Todd Williams also notes the possibility that Buffy would prefer to be dead again: "[Buffy] ends the song by singing, 'I just want to be / alive.' But does she? She insists that she does not want to lose all her drive, but Buffy's struggle is one of competing drives. Throughout the episode, Buffy faces this age old question of 'To be or not to be'" (6).

6 An awareness of audience is evident elsewhere in "Once More, with Feeling"; see, for example, Buffy's direct address to the audience at the words "And you can sing along" in "Something to Sing About" and Anya's explanation to Giles, "I felt like we were being watched, like a wall was missing from our apartment, like there were only three walls, no forth wall...."

7 As J.M. Kertzer explains, a rhetorical question is "an indirect assertion [...] posed in such a way as to suggest its own reply or to create an effect, rather than to solicit an answer" (242). Moreover, "As a general remark one could say that in rhetorical questions the speaker is unmistakably affirmative towards the proposition, i.e. the sentence is assertory" (Athanasiadou 117).

8 Certainly Buffy seems not to care about her life's endeavor given her response to the question posed by the "Handsome Young Victim Man": "How can I repay--?" he asks, but he doesn't get the chance to complete the sentence before Buffy responds, "Whatever."

9 As the Chosen One, "She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness." Buffy often points to her status as Slayer as that which separates her from the others. This is the very reality Buffy changes in "Chosen."

10 The bunny theory is, of course, offered by Anya. Given her tendency toward literalism, she does not recognize Buffy's questions as rhetorical.

11 Rhonda Wilcox also notes the disjunction in Buffy's contribution to this song: "The superficial vocal and visual togetherness, however, is undercut lyrically by Buffy's theory that 'it doesn't matter'; and though she then seems to say we don't need to care because we can be confident of success, she also adds that, since these are 'the same old trips, why should we care?'—a question which Giles hears clearly, if the others do not" (198-199). Note also that the Scoobies sing, "It's do or die," at which point Buffy reminds everyone that she's already died twice. Death is clearly not what Buffy fears (and may be what she desires).

12 This exchange occurs just prior to "The Parking Ticket" song.

13 I have discussed the overall pattern of questioning between Willow and Tara in my paper "Is that just a comforting way of not answering the question?": Willow, Questions, and Affective Response in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." This paper is available online: <<http://www.slayage.tv/essays/slayage20/Masson.htm>>.

14 Tara does not believe on a conscious level that she is under a literal spell, but the lyrics suggest that she glimpses the truth at a subconscious level. Todd Williams notes this disparity between the metaphorical and literal spell: "When Tara sings," writes Williams, "she expresses her love in metaphor, but also, she expresses her deepest fears that some aspects of their relationship are cheapened by Willow's use of magic" (2).

15 Although Willow knows that Tara deserves a literal answer, she does not provide one; she neither alleviates Tara's insecurities nor reveals any of her own. Willow does not sing to Tara. Thus, despite the apparent love song feeling of "Under Your Spell" and despite the fact that Willow and Tara begin to make love by the end of the song, this relationship is clearly not on equal footing. As Rhonda Wilcox says, "It is worth noting that Willow sings very little in this episode; aside from the extratextual reason of Alyson Hannigan's request not to, in the context of the episode it means that we are not given too direct an indication of Willow's coming darkness" (203). Rhonda Wilcox

also discusses Willow and Tara's flawed relationship and says, "The interruption of the song corresponds to the interruption of the relationship" (203).

16 Todd Williams notes, "The fact that both of them will 'never tell' is exactly the problem in their relationship" (5).

17 Anya, after all, does become a demon again. And Xander does express concerns about Anya's alternative appearance in "Doublemeat Palace" when he meets Halfrek.

18 The Scoobies go so far as to have the Buffybot stand in for Buffy at school so that Dawn can remain at home rather than be shipped off to live with her father.

19 Dawn may even fear that Buffy wants to die again. After she learns that Buffy was in heaven, she certainly seems to realize this. Indeed, she says to Buffy in "Dead Things," "You didn't wanna come back. I know that. You were happier where you were. You wanna go away again" (6.13).

20 Dawn's annoying behaviour has provoked audience members to question whether Dawn is worthy of Buffy's sacrifice. Anne Billson, for example, admits to an "impassioned yell of 'For God's sake, let them take Dawn instead!'" (104).

21 As Rhonda Wilcox points out in regard to the group's lack of cohesiveness in this song, "it hardly takes a rhetorical expert to note the difference in the emphasis" between "Understand we'll go hand in hand, but we'll walk alone in fear" and "We'll walk alone in fear, but understand we'll go hand in hand" (200).

22 For a discussion of Sweet and "Once More, with Feeling" as a "racial critique," see Jeffrey Middents, "A Sweet Vamp: Critiquing the Treatment of Race in Buffy and the American Musical Once More (with Feeling)." This article is available online: <<http://www.slayage.tv/essays/slayage17/Middents.htm>>.

23 Buffy admits to Willow at the end of "Gone" that she would have welcomed death; Tara confronts Willow's violation of her in "Tabula Rasa"; when Xander and Anya discuss their failed relationship in "Entropy," Xander says, "All I had to do was say something earlier" ; Dawn discusses her feelings of "being alone" in "Older and Far Away."

24 In a show that, as Rob Cover writes, "[plays] with the complexity of episodic closure that is never quite closure" (para. 22), the lack of a direct answer to final questions is not only the point but a necessity.