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Psychology of a "Superstar": A Psychological Analysis of Jonathan Levinson



[1] In the midst of a very serious series of events in *Buffy's* fourth season, writer Jane Espenson gives the audience a bit of comic relief in the episode "Superstar" (4.17), in which Jonathan Levinson, a minor recurring character, casts an augmentation spell and becomes the coolest thing on Earth. In her article "*Buffy's* Mary Sue is Jonathan," Justine Larbalestier makes the case for "Superstar" being one of many episodes to acknowledge and parody fan culture. As the most ordinary character in the series, Jonathan is certainly the most appropriate character for a Mary Sue; his place in the ensemble is to represent the viewer, an ordinary person who wishes to be part of the Scoobies. However, *Buffy* writers never write one-dimensional episodes, and there is more to Jonathan and "Superstar" than parody. For a fictional character, Jonathan is remarkably nuanced and layered, speaking to the *Buffy* writers' ability to bring characters to vivid life and provide them with believable psychological drive. Since he is a fictional character, there can only be so many layers to his psyche. Jonathan's actions can be attributed to a general lack of self-esteem, an external locus of control, and an unrealistic ideal self. Jonathan struggles with these issues for most of the series, but finally overcomes them before his death in "Conversations with Dead People" (7007).

[2] It is not difficult to tell that Jonathan suffers from a lack of self-esteem, and the reasons for it are easy to ascertain. He is a "typical" victim —anxious, insecure, sensitive, and quiet. Because he is smaller and weaker than the average male, not classically good-looking, and dresses in oversized, off-brand clothing, he is the target of teasing and occasionally more physical attacks from larger males ("Go Fish," 2.20) and catty remarks from the popular girls ("The Wish," 3.9). He is seen as a "safe" male; Cordelia dates him briefly after nearly being fed to a demon by richer, more powerful men ("Reptile Boy," 2.5). Far from the powerful, entitled fraternity boys, Jonathan is "pathetically grateful for attention" (Buchanan 242). Because he offers no real or effective resistance to the abuse of his peers, he gives off "victim" signals; "the behavior and signals of passive victims are a signal that they are insecure and worthless individuals who will not retaliate if they are attacked or insulted" (Olweus 186). Jonathan's demeanor is reserved and withdrawn; in "The Wish," he is seen

huddled against the side of the stairwell, clutching his Big Gulp cup in his lap, his knees drawn up almost to his chest, in a classic defensive posture. When the girls use him as the object of their joke on Cordelia, he does not look surprised, merely resigned, and he says nothing to defend himself (though Buchanan speculates this is the last straw leading to his spectacular suicide attempt in "Earshot," 3018 [243]). He does not seem to think he deserves any happiness, or at least doesn't fight for the possibility of happiness—when Ampata singles him out in "Inca Mummy Girl" (2.4), he is surprised ("Aren't you with Xander?"), awkward ("Your hands feel kinda . . . rough."), and probably suspicious—why is this "exotic hottie [. . .] putting the moves on him," anyway (Buchanan 242)? When Xander stumbles upon the couple, Jonathan leaves quickly, seeming relieved rather than upset. He does occasionally attempt to take revenge on those who hurt him—in "Go Fish," for example, he admits to peeing in the pool—but for the most part, things in his life simply happen to him without his help or resistance.

[3] Jonathan's social comparison, or evaluation of himself in comparison to a reference group (Larsen and Buss 449), is skewed. His reference group, the other students at the high school, consists of people and creatures of preternatural origin and ability—Slayers, mad scientists, werewolves, and witches—while he is completely normal. He sees himself as inferior to everyone else, imagining that they don't see him at all—he thinks Buffy "doesn't even know I'm here" in the cafeteria ("Earshot," 3.18). At the same time, he commits a sinister attribution error (Bordens and Horowitz 84), imagining others to have malicious thoughts and intentions toward him—"You all think I'm an idiot! A short idiot!" ("Earshot"). Buffy's reply, that nobody really thinks about him much at all, may have been part of the catalyst for his ultimate decision to cast the spell; among other things, the spell *forces* everyone to think about him practically incessantly because he is everywhere. Unlike Xander's love spell in "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" (2.16), however, this forced attention on Jonathan does not backlash. All of the attention he receives is positive, and what little negative attention there is—mostly from Spike—is impotent at best. Also unlike Xander's love spell, the attention Jonathan receives never becomes threatening. Karen's stalking, which consists of watching his mansion through binoculars, is the closest thing to maladaptive behavior anyone directs at him. The women—and some of the men—lust after him, and the men want to be him; the spell has turned social comparison on its head, making him the person everyone else compares him- or herself to rather than the other way around.

[4] Due to the supernatural nature of Jonathan's reference group, his ideal self, or the person he wants to be, is unrealistic. He compares himself to those around him and falls short—even shorter than he would in a group of completely ordinary people. Because he is completely ordinary, his social comparisons will never allow him to feel that he is special or worthwhile. What he fails to realize is that even the supernatural people around him are less than perfect; as Larbalestier points out, the spell makes Jonathan good at everything, while there is a great deal that Buffy is not good at (233). In other circumstances, Jonathan probably would have developed learned helplessness, or quit trying to change his

circumstances because his repeated attempts to do so keep failing (Larsen and Buss 393). He may even have successfully committed suicide. However, since he lives on the Hellmouth, Jonathan has access to paranormal remedies for his problem. He can and does become his ideal self in the space of a second—with magic. Magic equalizes the social comparison; with magic, he can be as powerful as Willow, as skilled in martial arts as Buffy, as suave as Spike, and smart enough to give the Initiative the single piece of information needed to kill Adam. Magic is the only thing that allows him to have control over his life. Unfortunately, magic in the Buffyverse is often seen as cheating; Buffy mocks Faith for stealing Angel through magic (“Enemies,” 3.17), Willow becomes addicted to magic partially due to how easy it makes everything (“Tabula Rasa,” 6.8), and Buffy reminds Jonathan at the end of “Superstar” (4.17) that “things are complicated. They take time and work.” The control that magic gives Jonathan is illusory and ultimately doesn’t make him happy.

[5] The bullying that Jonathan has experienced has led him to believe that he has no control over his life. He has developed an external locus of control, a generalized expectancy that things—grades, accomplishments, and people’s reactions to him, for example—are outside his control, due to luck or chance rather than his actions (Larsen and Buss 391). In essence, he is committing the reverse of the fundamental attribution error, assigning credit for people’s success, and his own failure, entirely to external circumstances rather than internal motivation (Bordens and Horowitz 82). This is his justification for casting this spell; he doesn’t understand how much people’s accomplishments mean because he doesn’t realize how much work had to go into them. He thinks Buffy is lucky, not hardworking. He doesn’t realize how much she has to sacrifice, instead assuming that her life is easy. “Oh, sure,” he tells her in the clock tower, “‘cause the burden of being beautiful and athletic, that’s a real crippler” (“Earshot,” 3.18). Because Jonathan believes that people’s talents and accomplishments are due to luck rather than hard work, he has no idea how much he is violating them by taking their accomplishments away. Because he lacks the ability and self-confidence to achieve his goals, he does not create his own accomplishments, but steals them from Buffy, Keanu Reeves, Tony DiCicco, and many others. In stealing Buffy’s accomplishments, he also steals her self-confidence and happiness.

[6] While the spell is going well, Jonathan displays the qualities of a happy person as described by D.G. Myers and E. Deiner (95-98). He appears to like himself, at least the new version of himself. His locus of control has shifted inward; he has taken control of his life and made things happen rather than waiting for luck to do it for him. When Buffy comes to him during the “Superstar” teaser, he is quick to offer his help even before he knows what the problem is. He is optimistic, extroverted, and confident. In contrast to the huddled, slouching figure in “The Wish” (3.9), he stands up straight, looks people in the eye, and wears tailored suits or crisp military fatigues. Now he can face and match wits with Spike, give the Initiative information on Adam, and advise Buffy on her love life. His newfound ability to be good at anything and everything he tries has given him the self-esteem boost he needs in order to approach people

and appear onstage.

[7] Although his decision to resort to the black arts to become someone special is obviously a bad one, Jonathan is not inherently a bad person. When he discovers that the monster created by his spell is hurting people, he chooses to sacrifice his own happiness and success to protect others. He leads Buffy to the monster's lair and assists her, as much as he is able, in killing it, breaking the spell, and returning him to, in Anya's words, "some sort of not-perfect mouth breather." While the spell is in effect, he does not use his personality and power to retaliate against people who have been mean to him. Rather, he encourages people to be the best they can be and offers his expertise to help others. He may come across as condescending, but he truly wants to be part of the Scoobies and help Buffy fight evil.

[8] The experience teaches him that using magic to control others is wrong—a fact that his response to Buffy's comment that "people didn't like being the actors in your sock-puppet theater" shows he did not understand before he cast the spell ("you weren't socks!" he protests. "You were friends.")—but he does not completely learn his lesson that adversity cannot be overcome with "some big gesture all at once" ("Superstar," 4.17). In "Flooded" (6.3), he tells his compatriots, "life is like an interstellar journey. Some people go into hypersleep and travel at sub-light speeds, only to get where they're going after years of struggle, toil, and hard, hard work. We, on the other hand . . ." "Blast through the space-time continuum in a wormhole?" Andrew responds. Jonathan nods, affirming, "Gentlemen, crime is our wormhole." Although Jonathan has come to understand that fixing things takes work and time, he still believes that shortcuts to fame and fortune are possible and desirable. The taste of power he attained in "Superstar" leads him to begin to seek that power in the real world, and since the Scoobies haven't taken him in, he joins the Trio and decides to become a Supervillain (Buchanan 245).

[9] While part of the Trio, Jonathan shows that he has grown beyond many of his issues, but not all of them. He is more confident, offering ideas and skills to help further the Trio's agenda. His speech mannerisms are less hesitant, more self-assured. He asserts himself and defends his thoughts and opinions. When Warren is content to let Buffy remain invisible and eventually fade into nothingness ("Gone," 6.11), Jonathan demands that he "re-visible" her before it's too late. Among a group of his peers, he does not consider himself as worthless as he previously did. Instead, he considers himself better than Andrew, often calling him names such as "numb-nuts" ("Life Serial," 6.5), "bonehead" ("Gone," 6.11), and "moron" ("Two to Go," 6.21). When it becomes obvious that Warren has abandoned them and Andrew still expects him to come back, Jonathan says Andrew is "sadness personified" ("Two to Go," 6.21).

[10] Unfortunately, Jonathan's newfound confidence works against him; he is unwilling to follow Warren's spiral into true evil and not afraid to voice that unwillingness. As long as their activities don't directly hurt anyone, Jonathan goes along with the group. But when their "fun" becomes attempted rape and murder ("Dead Things," 6.13), Jonathan ceases to be one of the group, and is

quite vocal about his desire to get out. Because of his refusal to take the submissive role in their relationship, Warren and Andrew plot against him, planning to leave him to take all of the blame for their activities ("Seeing Red," 6.19). This is when Jonathan learns the price of his actions, and he is willing to pay that price—at least until Willow threatens his life ("Two to Go," 6.21), at which point he agrees with Andrew that fleeing to Mexico is a good idea ("Grave," 6.22).

[11] At some point during his stint in Mexico, Jonathan truly grows up. When he and Andrew begin having the "from beneath you" dreams, he decides they must return to Sunnydale and try to help stop the end of the world ("Conversations with Dead People," 7.7). He shows that he finally understands the price of true heroism when he plans to close the Seal of Danzalthar and save the world, even the people who were mean to him in high school. "I miss my friends," he says, "I miss my enemies, I miss the people I talked to every day. I miss the people who never knew I existed. I miss 'em all. I want to talk to them, you know. I want to find out how they're doing. I want to know what's going on in their lives. [. . .] I still care about them. That's why I'm here." Understanding the damage he has done as part of the Trio and desiring to atone for it, he is willing to do what it takes to save the world, not in a spectacular leap from a tower, but in the basement of a school in the middle of the night. In true Whedon style, as soon as Jonathan has his epiphany, he is killed by Andrew, who is under the influence of the First Evil.

[12] Jonathan may have been a very minor character, but over the course of the show, he develops as much as, if not more than, some of the major characters. He grows from a nerdy, insecure outcast to a self-aware, self-sacrificing young man. From a picked-on, fearful boy to a man who is willing to do whatever it takes to save people who probably don't realize he exists. As the everyman of the series, the ordinary person who lives outside the limelight but yearns to be in it, he is the perfect, most obvious character to play the Mary Sue in an episode poking gentle fun at fan fiction and its culture. But he is also much more than that—a hero in the making in his own right. His lack of self-esteem, external locus of control, and unrealistic ideal self lead him to extreme lengths to attempt to become someone, but it isn't until he learns to look outside of his own problems that he discovers his worth.

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