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Mal-Adjusted: Integration of Selves in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*

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Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity* offer a brand new take on the well established science fiction film genre, one that many authors and viewers believe needed Whedon's fresh new ideas to prevent further stagnating of the genre. Whedon's *Firefly* focuses on the lives of Malcolm Reynolds (Mal) and his crew aboard the Firefly-class space ship named Serenity. Mal and his first-mate, Zoe, were companions in the civil war between the Alliance, the government who wanted to unite all of the planets under one rule, and the Independents (commonly known as the Browncoats) who supported the independent governments of each planet. Mal is the most compelling of the characters on the show because he is, in a way, the most fragile one. In the series premiere, "Serenity," Mal is a complete man. After the soldiers are abandoned in Serenity Valley by their commanders while the latter negotiate a peace treaty, something inside Mal breaks; he becomes a fractured man, losing his faith in God, in humanity and in government. Over the next six years, he buys the spaceship Serenity and gathers a close-knit crew in an attempt to put himself back together and to create a new identity for himself. Mal's identity conflict speaks to *Firefly's* viewers, and we are able to relate not only to Mal and his desire to protect himself and his pseudo-family, but also to his efforts to make himself whole by establishing a place for himself in the world. Mal's search for self identification through the development of loyal relationships is what inspires viewers to connect to Mal, which contributes to their untiring devotion to the *Firefly*verse.

By analyzing each of *Firefly's* characters in relation to Mal, I examine how they contribute to his efforts to rebuild his identity through the construction of a combined family unit. I use close analysis of the episodes of *Firefly* and the film *Serenity*, as well as several essays and articles written about the series and film. I also take into account interviews by creator, Joss Whedon, and actor, Nathan Fillion, about the development of the character Mal and the series as a whole.

Actor Nathan Fillion, who plays Mal, writes: "Looking at Kaylee, I could tell what kind of man Mal was. Speaking to Zoe, I could tell what kind of leader Mal was. Arguing with Wash and Jayne, I knew the limits of Mal's patience. They made me Mal. Looking back, I know now that everyone in the cast was, in essence, his

or her character” (Fillion 52). Viewers are able to identify with every character on *Firefly* because they are modeled after real people. Mal, and the rest of Serenity's crew, are the kinds of people who don't care how society defines them; they are the ones who strongly stand apart from the rest of society and give everyone else hope that they too can live their lives as fully realized individuals. Fans' love for *Firefly* proves that there is a strong unit of viewers who rely on television not only to provide entertainment, but also to provide for them a set of inspiring, realistic characters who they can relate to.

Introduction

Joss Whedon, the screenwriter/director, became famous through his creation of the television series *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*. He continues to be praised for the rich character development, thorough background setting, unique and interesting plots and fully fleshed out and empowered female characters in the *Buffyverse* (the world in which *Buffy* takes place). Whedon went on to create *Firefly*, a television show that is a blend of the science fiction and western genres. The series only lasted fourteen episodes before it was cancelled by the Fox Broadcasting Company, but in those episodes, Whedon succeeded in creating a world with an intricate history, fully developed and complicated characters, and an enthralling plot with many worthy subplots that would lead fans to become so obsessed that they would provoke Universal Studios to back the *Firefly*-based movie, *Serenity*, in 2005, almost three years after the series had been cancelled.

Whedon's *Firefly* focuses on the lives of Malcolm Reynolds (Mal) and his crew aboard the Firefly-class space ship named Serenity. Mal and his first-mate, Zoe, were companions in the civil war between the Alliance, the government who wanted to unite all of the planets under one rule, and the Independents (commonly known as the Browncoats) who supported the independent governments of each planet. Mal is the most compelling of the characters on the show because he is, in a way, the most fragile one. In the series premiere, "Serenity," Mal is a complete man. He is optimistic that the Independents will win the civil war. He has faith in God, in the support of his fellow troops, and in humanity. After the foot soldiers are abandoned in Serenity Valley by their commanders while the latter negotiate a peace treaty, something inside Mal breaks; he becomes a fractured man, losing his faith in God, in humanity and in government. Over the next six years, he buys the spaceship Serenity and gathers a close-knit crew in an attempt to put himself back together and to create a new identity for himself. Each of his crewmembers represents a different aspect of Mal's fractured self. Mal's identity conflict speaks to *Firefly's* viewers, and we are able to relate not only to Mal and his desire to protect himself and his pseudo-family, but also to his efforts to make himself whole by establishing a place for himself in the world. Mal's search for self identification through the development of loyal relationships is what inspires viewers to connect to Mal, which contributes to their untiring devotion to the *Firefly*verse.

Firefly Context

Joss Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity* offer a brand new take on the well established science fiction film genre, one that many authors and viewers believe needed Whedon's fresh new ideas to prevent further stagnating of the genre. Maggie Burns writes in her article, "Mars Needs Women: How a Dress, a Cake, and a Goofy Hat Will Save Science Fiction" that:

Science fiction is broken... science fiction threatens to spin itself into a self-referential genre so disconnected from everything else that only initiates can find value in it, a tiny irrelevant genre jealously

guarded by hard-core fans. So much insider knowledge accrues about each created universe that it pushes away the newcomer... What is the cure for sci-fi's problems? A goofy knitted hat. A frilly dress. A birthday cake. You and me, and people we know, in space: *Firefly* (15).

Burns argues that the science fiction genre has become dominated by antiseptic, militarized hegemonic space settings full of super-hero like characters with few faults where all of the representatives of negative human qualities are portrayed by aliens. She praises Whedon for creating a piece of science fiction that is genuinely real: it has characters that we can all easily identify as people we have encountered, as well as situations that we have all experienced.

Science fiction writer, Orson Scott Card writes that "I started watching *Firefly* and within ten minutes I knew: The writer of this series had actually read a book, and instead of copying it, like everybody else doing film sci-fi, he had understood what science fiction is for and how it's done, and he had created something *new*" (11) in his article, "Catching Up With the Future." Card confides that while print science fiction had been taking great leaps forward for decades, film science fiction had remained frustratingly stagnant for many years. He writes that he had all but given up on film science fiction, such as popular high budget sagas like *Star Wars* and *Dune* that unfortunately featured simplistic storylines and character development, which is why he didn't get around to watching *Firefly* until years after it had already been cancelled. The presence of not only *Firefly*, but also the feature film *Serenity*, inspires Card to hope: "Now that they've seen what sci-fi *can* be on screen, isn't it just possible that a new generation of writers will take the same kind of care to create scripts that aspire to this new standard?... It's just possible that *Firefly* and *Serenity* have pulled the whole sci-fi film genre up to a level where it is possible for science fiction as good as the best of contemporary print sci-fi to be put on the screen" (13). Card and Burns praise Whedon for being familiar with science fiction, and for creating an unique piece of fiction rather than synthesizing what many others have already done.

One of the biggest drawbacks that Whedon encountered with the creation of this inventive, witty and entertaining piece is that many people did not recognize its genius simply because it is so different from most

other current popular television series. Another serious drawback was that the order Fox showed the episodes in made it nearly impossible for even instant die-hard fans to watch regularly: “Its wildly inventive premise and pithy dialogue earned it critical praise, but good reviews couldn't save it: Fox showed episodes out of sequence, frequently pre-empted the show and finally canned it mid-season” (Chonin). Those that were able to watch the show during its original airing times quickly became fans, and through word of mouth, emails and many internet forums and websites created just for the show, these Browncoats (fans named for the doomed Independent army Mal fought for during the war) “campaignned to have it moved to another network. True to Browncoat tradition, they failed -- but their efforts convinced Fox to release the show as a DVD set that included three unaired episodes and behind-the-scenes extras. The DVD quickly sold more than 200,000 copies. Impressed, Universal Pictures climbed onboard, enabling Whedon to make *Serenity* ... which picks up where the series left off” (Chonin). These die-hard Browncoats are credited with convincing Universal Pictures to help Whedon continue Mal’s story because they not only wrote petitions and letters to everyone with any influence, but also created numerous websites devoted entirely to *Firefly*, such as *Fireflyfans.net*, *Browncoats.com*, and *SFBrowncoats.com*, where *Firefly* actors chatted with and introduced more people to their passion revolving around *Firefly*.

Whedon admits that he knew a lot of viewers would have trouble understanding *Firefly* and says, “Sci-fi and Westerns sound antithetical. They’re not. It’s a pioneer story. It’s the people who live on the fringe of society. That fringe happens to be a planet instead of the coast of California, but it’s the same experience. And that’s an experience that’s happened throughout humanity so it makes perfect sense that it would keep happening later” (qtd. in Murray). Whedon proves that he enjoys taking well-established genres and reinventing them, just as he did with the bubble-gum cheerleader high school drama and vampire slayer genres. With *Firefly*, Whedon combined the science fiction genre, which Burns and Card point out had not been producing much quality film products of late, and the Western genre, which experienced its film heyday in the times of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. In an era where the highest rated television shows primarily consist of talent

contests, reality shows featuring washed up actors or musicians, sex, violent crimes, mysteries, or any combination of these qualities, it is no great surprise that the FOX executives did not recognize the quality television that Whedon was creating.

Breaking Point and Recovery

At the beginning of “Serenity” and during flashbacks in other episodes, Mal is portrayed as a young man who is guided by his strong faith and is willing to recklessly support anything that he truly believes in. A flashback in the episode “The Message” depicts Mal seven years before *Firefly* takes place, fight in the Battle of Du Khang, as someone who has little regard for rules or tradition, as seen when Zoe informs Tracey, a fellow soldier, that the first rule of battle is to never let the enemy know where you are, just as Mal comes running away from and shooting at the Alliance troops, shouting, “Whoo hooo! I’m right here! I’m right here! Come and get me!” (“The Message”). Regardless of Mal’s bold behavior, he succeeds in getting to a safe position, and on top of that, he is quite invigorated. Mal takes each obstacle head-on, never shirking from a duty. When it’s up to him to decide what to do with their unit, Mal opts for the safer decision, moving the unit to a more defensible position, rather than remaining in their scattered, defenseless position. Mal also clears it with Zoe and Tracey that the command had come from their lieutenant, who had suffered a nervous breakdown due to the stress of battle, so that the lieutenant won’t lose face in case he recovers at any point. The fact that Mal is able to disregard common rules of warfare but still act decently to his incapacitated commanding officer shows how complex and innately good-hearted he is. This aspect of Mal’s character demonstrates one of the many examples of how Mal is constructed as a worthy hero.

Mal constantly shows that he has faith in his religion and his companions. He repeatedly speaks about and shows signs of his faith in God. When Zoe asks if he believes that they can truly succeed in the Battle of

Serenity Valley, he confidently answers, “Do you really need to ask?” (“Serenity”) and kisses his cross. When Mal tries to comfort Bendis to inspire him to become active again, Mal insures him that God would never let them die because they are “just too pretty” (“Serenity”). During “The Message,” Tracey mentions that Mal used to be full of “stories and his homilies, of glory and honor” during the war, showing that Mal not only used to be hopeful and religious, but that he wanted everyone else to share in his beliefs.

When Mal is introduced in *Firefly*, he is shown at the height of his idealism; this is done so that the viewers can truly understand the drastic shift from optimistic idealist to bitter realist that Mal makes within a split second. “Serenity,” opens during the battle of Serenity Valley, one year after Mal and Tracey had fought together in Du Khang, with Mal, Zoe and their fellow soldiers figuring out how to call in a desperately needed air strike when all of the commanding officers (and most of the other soldiers) have died. Everyone is dispirited, some so much so to the point of being catatonic, and while Mal, who has become the highest ranking officer, takes control of the remaining people, an enemy strike hits the bunker in which they are hiding, killing the man who Mal had just been giving an order to. Mal is not fazed; he simply passes the responsibility on to the next soldier. He asks for cover fire as he and Zoe run out of the bunker to take on nearby enemies; Mal recklessly makes his way to an Alliance anti-aircraft gun and shoots down an enemy ship. He is proud of his accomplishment, until he gets back to the bunker to find only one man still alive, Bendis, the man who had been too catatonic to offer cover fire while Mal ran out. After grabbing the radio, Zoe informs Mal and Bendis that there will be no air support, or support of any kind, because their command is going into peace negotiations with the Alliance and has recommended that they lay down arms. Zoe and Bendis stand up on either side of Mal, who stares in utter shock at the descending Alliance ships. Mal is so completely distraught that he doesn’t blink as Bendis is gunned down just inches from him. Because When Mal discovered that his prayers weren’t being answered, and his loyalty to his commanders wasn’t being returned, he lost all faith in prayer and in his cause. This moment of realization is the moment in which Mal’s identity as an Independent, a Christian, and a man who never gives up, is shattered, and he is left with nothing that he had previously valued.

A deleted scene from the same episode provides more context for Mal's behavior. Zoe sits down to talk with Simon after she overhears him listening to an encyclopedia entry about the Battle of Serenity Valley because she wants to make sure that Simon understands the significance that the Battle had on Mal, not just the statistics and the prepared speeches included in the encyclopedia. Simon comments that he realizes that the history is skewed because it was "programmed by the winners," at which point Zoe informs him that "nearly half a million soldiers lay dead at the end of the day, nearly one third of them 'winners'" ("Serenity" Special Features). She goes on to play on Simon's role as a surgeon, and his knowledge of what a dead body would look like: "Can you imagine that smell? Can you imagine piling up the bodies of soldiers, of friends, to build a wall because you've got no cover?" ("Serenity" Special Features). Zoe continues:

He was my sergeant, commanded 30-odd grunts. Five days in, there were so many officers dead, he commanded 2,000. Kept us together, kept us fighting, kept us sane. By the time the fighting was over, he had maybe 400 still intact... I said the fighting was over. But you see, they left us there. Wounded and sick and near to mad, as can still walk and talk, both sides left us there. While they negotiated the peace. For a week. And we kept dying. When they finally sent in med ships, he had about 150 left, and of our original platoon, just me. *Mercy, forgiveness, trust, those were things he left back there. What he has now is the ship. The ship and us on it* ("Serenity" Special Features).

After this speech, Simon finally stops trying to express his sympathy or empathy, and simply asks, "If that battle was so horrible, why did he name the ship after it?" Zoe responds as she walks out the door, "Once you've been in Serenity, you never leave. You just learn to live there" ("Serenity" Special Features). Zoe is the perfect person to carry this important message to Simon, because she is the only one who understands Mal enough to explain him, and at the time, Simon's very life depended on proving to Mal that he was responsible and worthy of Mal risking his ship.

It is difficult for the viewer to immediately see how well Mal and Zoe have been coping with life after being on the losing side of the war; it is not until we understand how poorly Tracey has recovered that we can see Mal's success in comparison. During a recording he made for Mal and Zoe, Tracey claims that both he and Mal "went to the war not expecting to get out," but it was "the real world" that Tracey couldn't deal with ("The

Message”). He finds himself in a situation where he believes that his best option is to fake his own death and ship his body to Mal and Zoe for safe keeping. After the war, Tracey ended up doing several odd jobs, but his final occupation is to serve as a transporter and incubator for scientifically developed human organs. However, things went awry when Tracey tried to subvert his initial buyers for a higher price. A “trail of bodies” (“The Message”) was left behind Tracey as he attempted to run away from his problems and flee to the relative safety that he knew would be offered by Mal. It is evident that Tracey and Mal faced nearly identical dilemmas after the war ended, but while Tracey was unable to establish a new life for himself, Mal was able to carve a new niche for himself with the help of Zoe and their ship Serenity. The character of Tracey offers a foil for Mal, and an image of what Mal could have turned into had he not had the solid and dependable family life that he created for himself among the crew of Serenity.

After Mal’s entire identity as a volunteer Independent soldier was taken from him, he is able to build a new life for himself as a captain. He falls in love with Serenity upon first laying eyes on her (“Out of Gas”), and convinces Zoe to go into business with him, by telling her that they can

Live like real people. A small crew. They must feel the need to be free. Take jobs as they come. They never have to be under the heel of nobody ever again. No matter how long the arm of the Alliance might get... we'll just get ourselves a little further (“Out of Gas”).

Mal plays upon the hope that Zoe and he had been fighting for: the establishment of a free and more ideal world. Serenity represents, for both of them, the chance to live the life that was taken from them when the Independents lost the war. Serenity forms the core of the family life that Mal works so hard to build around himself in his attempt to create a new identity for himself.

After Mal had secured Serenity as the home for his new self, he set about finding a family to populate it. Zoe is a given as Mal’s right-hand woman, and she continues her habit of supporting Mal even when he doesn’t realize he is in need of help. Kaylee becomes the “genius mechanic” who keeps their used spaceship flying, while Wash is the talented pilot who navigates their home through the many obstacles that lay in their path.

Jayne, a mercenary and tracker, serves as an invaluable source of protection and entertainment for the crew. Mal rents out one of Serenity's two shuttles to Inara, a registered Companion, a high-class courtesan who brings elegance and respectability to the ship.

During the first episode of *Firefly*, Mal takes on (as far as he knows) three passengers. One passenger turns out to be a federal agent pursuing two fugitives, Simon Tam (the second passenger) and his sister River, who, unbeknownst to Mal is hidden in cryogenic stasis. After Simon proves his value as a skilled surgeon, Mal offers him a place on Serenity, so long as he keeps an eye on his apparently mentally unstable sister. The third passenger is Book, a priest, or Shepherd, who is looking to “walk a spell” in the real world (“Serenity”).

Characters/Personalities

Zoe: The Warrior

Zoe represents the side of Mal that is strictly dispassionate; before Zoe met Mal, she had been career military. Zoe has the potential to be more dangerous than Mal because she does not let emotions get in the way of her fighting. During a flashback in “The Message,” Zoe is shown cutting the throat of an Alliance scout who had been about to kill Tracey; according to Alan Tudyk (Wash), in the episode’s commentary, Zoe kills the man with the ease of “opening a letter”; she is completely unaffected by the death that she causes. Maggie Burns asks the viewer to consider who they would prefer to have a gun pulled on them by, Mal or Zoe. She considers Mal to be the obvious preference “because he’d blink, and then bash you in the head and leave you there to come back and bit him in the ass another day. But Zoe would blow your head off without thinking twice or breathing hard” (20-1). During the scene in which she explains the significance of Serenity Valley to Simon, she tells him that Mal would only kill him if he saw no other option; however, when Simon asks what would happen if Mal tells Zoe to kill him, she replies, completely deadpan, “Then I kill you” (“Serenity” Special

Features). Zoe is the most solid and dependable thing in Mal's life, as she proves by being there in every situation in which he might need help.

While Zoe is brutally efficient in every way, she is also fiercely loyal Mal in every way. The episode "The Message" stresses a quote that was popular among the Browncoats: "When you can't run, you crawl; when you can't crawl, you find somebody to carry you." The saying is used in reference to Zoe and Mal trying to help out an old war buddy, but it should also be directly applied to Zoe and Mal's relationship. Zoe carried Mal through the end of the war and helped him get back on his feet, by always being there for him. If Mal did not have Zoe to support him, he would have become a lot more like Tracey, constantly drifting through life. Zoe's one significant difference between herself and Mal is that she represents his hard side, while still being able to let love into her life. Zoe is not only "the warrior," she is "*both a woman and a warrior*... Since she knows who she is, rather than who she's supposed to be, she's capable of actually having a sane relationship and even of acknowledging its importance" (West 98). She successfully bridges the identity of the detached fighter with a steady and loyal love life through her marriage with Wash. Zoe is an idealized figure who links both lives together, but even though Mal is unable to understand her and how she is able to do this, she still serves as a model for him.

Jayne: The Brawn

Jayne is the brawn or the hired gun aboard Serenity. He is loyal to Mal so long as the money is good enough, which he and Mal openly discussed in the pilot episode. Jayne has a code that he sticks to, no matter what, just like Mal (even though the details of their personal codes are quite different). In *Serenity*, Jayne gives Kaylee a glimpse into his morality code; he questions the existence of Reavers, mad, violent bands of humans who attack spaceships and small colonies where they practice horrible atrocities on the people they capture. Jayne asks, "Eating people, where does that get fun?" and admits that he has no problem killing a man "in a fair fight, or if he starts a fight, or if I think he's gonna start a fight, or if there's a woman, or if I'm getting paid, but

mostly only if I'm getting paid" (*Serenity*). There is no mystery behind any of Jayne's actions; all the cards are on the table. Jayne lives for money, sex, guns; simple motives, simple pleasures. He represents Mal's primal side because he isn't troubled by the past or his actions, and he lives completely in the present. In "Heart of Gold," Mal volunteers his crew to protect a friend of Inara's brothel. Jayne economically, if not kind-heartedly, refuses to help out because Mal can't promise to pay Jayne; however, when Mal points out that the women are whores, Jayne is suddenly excited to take on the job. As soon as the crew arrives in the brothel, Jayne's first statement is "when am I going to get sexed already?" (*Serenity*), and continues to spend all of his time in the brothel, even while he is actively defending it, with the woman he initially becomes enamored with, showing that he is wholly occupied with his more carnal desires. While Mal is always restrained, Jayne is guided by only what benefits himself best at any given moment.

For Mal, Jayne serves as a checkpoint or a litmus test for his morals. If Jayne ever unhesitatingly agrees with Mal's actions, he knows to take a step back and reconsider things. Jayne never stops questioning Mal's motives, which works to keep Mal always honestly doing what he believes is right, because he has to defend his beliefs every step of the way. Without Jayne's constant insubordination, Mal could potentially stray from his path of moral righteousness one of the many times when he chose to avoid the easy option and opt for the much more complicated, but morally superior decision.

Kaylee: The Heart

Kaylee represents a contrary side of Mal, a side that is able to happily and healthily deal with all emotions and desire. Kaylee represents the healthy family life that Mal yearns for, which he is only able to express with Kaylee; he often hugs her or rubs her head, signs of the physical closeness that he does not share with any other member of the crew. Kaylee is also always optimistic and cheerful, so much so that Mal jokingly says that he sometimes wants to tape her mouth shut and lock her in "the hold for a month" to escape her incessant cheerfulness, to which Kaylee replies by kissing Mal's cheek and saying "I love my Captain" before

she walks away (“Serenity”). Right before this conversation takes place, the crew closely avoids Alliance attention while illegally scavenging on a derelict spaceship, showing Kaylee’s ability to be affectionate even in close parameter with dangerous situations. Kaylee is aware of the dangers and risks surrounding their lives, but chooses to look at the bright side of things. Kaylee is the ship’s mechanic so it is her job to keep the “beating heart” of Serenity moving because she is the one thing standing between life and death for the crew of Serenity because breaking down in the middle of space means almost certain death for the entire crew. Kaylee can never avoid the knowledge of her responsibility, yet this awareness never seems to weigh down Kaylee’s shoulders, except for the one time that there is an actual problem with the engine, where she expresses not fear of death, but her guilt over being unable to take care of everyone else. As soon as the problem is fixed, however, Kaylee promptly returns to her charmingly optimistic demeanor. While Mal is talking with the crew after he wakes up from surgery, Kaylee comes in and praises Mal for fixing the engine all by himself: “Hey Captain, you fixed the ship, good work” (“Out of Gas”). She shows that she is proud of Mal, not only because he overcame his “captain dummy-talk” disability and managed to fix the engine, but because he did what he had always promised to do: look after and protect his crew.

The other important aspect of Kaylee's personality that presents room for positive growth for Mal is her sexuality. Even though Kaylee is often portrayed as innocent, the flashback where Kaylee is introduced proves that she is completely open about her sex life. Mal first encounters Kaylee when he walks in on her having sex with Serenity's then current mechanic, Bester. Instead of being embarrassed, she jumps right into the conversation about Serenity's prolonged delay because of Bester's inability to fix the ship's engine, and promptly repairs the engine in a span of thirty seconds after telling the two men “I had seen the problem clear as day when I was down there on my back before” (“Out of Gas”). Kaylee also openly expresses her desire towards Simon many times throughout the series and the movie through subtle flirting, such as in “Serenity,” that escalates to slightly more obvious behavior, such as when she encourages Simon to “say more good things” about her after Simon somewhat accidentally manages to compliment her (“The Message”). Kaylee displays her

openness with her sexuality in *Serenity*, where she tells Mal that it had been “over a year since I’ve had something ‘twixt my legs that wasn’t run on batteries,” to which Mal exclaims “I can’t know that!” Later in the film, when the crew is facing almost certain death at the hands of a horde of Reavers, Simon apologizes that he was never able to devote enough attention to Kaylee because of his focus on River, and when Kaylee realizes that he is in fact apologizing for never becoming intimate with her, she proclaims, “to hell with this, I’m going to live!” (*Serenity*). Kaylee does not repress her desire or emotions, and often encourages Mal to express his own.

Simon: The Twin

Simon is a foil to Mal because even though the two men are superficially different, they share many of the same personal qualities. Both men are driven by their moral obligations, are extremely determined, are unable to develop healthy emotional relationships, and both believe that they are better than those around them. Simon is in the same emotional place as Mal because neither of them can move on to healthy sexual relations while they are hung up on their responsibilities, for Mal that is his duty to protect his ship and crew and for Simon that is his duty to protect his sister, River. The tensions that arise between Mal and Simon are always due to their similar personalities. After Kaylee is accidentally shot in “*Serenity*” just as an Alliance cruiser hails the ship telling them to give up Simon and his sister, Simon demands that Mal flees from the Alliance before he agrees to operate on Kaylee. Mal refuses, deriding Simon’s arrogance, and neither one of them is willing to change their minds until Kaylee attracts Mal’s attention by letting out a cry: Mal’s need to protect his crewmember overrides his aversion to compromise with Simon. The two men frequently butt heads because they are both incredibly stubborn about doing what they feel responsible for. Mal realizes that by taking Simon and River under his wing, he is thereby making the two men’s duties equal so that there can be no tension. By adopting Simon onto his crew, Mal creates common ground for the two men so they can work together instead of expending all of their individual energies trying to satisfy their personal goals.

Both Mal and Simon are also criminals who believe whole-heartedly they're doing the right thing. Mal breaks the law every chance that he gets, and Simon spent his fortune breaking his sister out of a government-controlled program, making both his sister and he fugitives. Even though Mal was raised on a ranch on one of the Outer Planets to be a man who fights for his beliefs and Simon was raised by a wealthy family on one of the Central Planets to be a prosperous surgeon, the two men share many basic characteristics. Shanna Swedson presents the idea that Mal and Simon "aren't two separate characters but rather different reflections on the same character, which allows us to see the hero in different phases of his life and on different parts of his journey" in her article, "A Tale of Two Heroes" (73). She also argues that "you could probably swap" Simon and Mal in any trying situation and "almost identical results" because "when either Mal or Simon is held over the metaphorical volcano's edge, they both react the same way – with sarcasm, stubbornness, and a touch of recklessness" (70-1). Because Mal and Simon are so similar, it is not surprising that they are both plagued by the same problems, but also are each other's biggest motivators.

Wash: The "Funny One"

Wash, while outwardly very different from Mal, shares many qualities that Mal had before the war, and is slowly beginning to gain back. Wash possesses the literal ability to navigate the ship through any problem, no matter what, just as Mal is able to maneuver through every obstacle that he and his crew encounter. Like Kaylee, Wash is aware of the dangers of their life, but is still light-hearted. He worries a lot, which Mal also does, although Mal doesn't want others to know that. When Mal and Zoe are out on a potentially dangerous job, Wash tells Simon that he always worries about his wife when she's working, and later in the same episode, when the ship is being chased by Reavers, Mal tells Inara to be prepared to flee in her shuttle if the Reavers succeed in boarding Serenity. Inara refuses, and Mal gently places his hand on her shoulder, showing a rare moment of sentimentality on Mal's part, which is what finally convinces Inara to listen to Mal. Wash is open

about his emotions, and while Mal shares similar emotions, he does not want anyone to know about some of his more human qualities.

Wash defines himself as “the funny one” (“Heart of Gold”) on the ship, and it is quite ironic that Wash’s sense of humor is often similar to the humor that Mal has during the war, as seen when he is trying to comfort Bendis in the Battle of Serenity Valley: “We’re just too pretty for God to let us die. Huh? Look at that chiseled jaw. Huh? Come on!” (“Serenity”) and when Mal observes, “They don’t like when you shoot at them. I picked that up myself” (“The Message”) during the Battle of Du Khang. Mal uses somewhat awkward humor here to lighten the current mood, just as Wash does in “War Stories” when he promises Mal that he can handle himself on a job when Mal is worried that they might face a difficult situation: “Hey, I’ve been in a firefight before. Well, I was in a fire. Actually, I was fired from a fry-cook opportunity. I can handle myself.” Both men wish to prove that they are confident and capable of handling situations, and to ensure their companions that there is no need to worry; however, in using their sense of humor to comfort their companions, both men misjudge the situations, and end up having to deal with the negative consequences.

Book: The Teacher

Shepherd Book represents a side of Mal that doesn’t exist anymore: faith in God and in human goodness. Because Mal believes wholeheartedly that he was fighting on the right side of the war, when the Browncoats lost, Mal’s faith was lost too. During the war, Mal fought for his beliefs in God, humanity and independence, but during *Firefly* and *Serenity* Mal only believes in fighting for “me and mine” (*Serenity*), a very small range of things, including the ship, Serenity, and his crew. A scene that highlights the divide between Mal and Book’s belief systems takes place in “Bushwhacked,” when they argue about the existence of Reavers. The crew had recently taken on a lone survivor of what they thought was a freak accident, but soon afterwards, Mal realizes that Reavers had attacked the small transport ship, killing and mutilating over fourteen families, and left one man along on the ship with all of the corpses. Mal understands that after having been forced to

watch all of the atrocities committed by the Reavers, the survivor has had no choice but to become a force of violence just like the Reavers. Book refuses to accept that, saying “Whatever acts of horror he witnessed, whatever acts of barbarism, it was done by men, nothing more” (“Bushwhacked”). Book thinks that since this was just a crime committed by people to other people, it is answerable to “a power greater than men. A power that heals” (“Bushwhacked”). Mal scoffs at Book’s faith, and reminds him that the Reavers wouldn’t agree with his philosophy because they would be too busy gnawing on his insides: “Reavers ain’t men. Or they forgot how to be. They got out to the edge of the galaxy, to that place of nothin’ and that’s what they became” (“Bushwhacked”). Mal refuses to consider Book’s religious ideas about Reavers, partially because he has more experience with the Reavers than Book does, but mostly because he does not want to acknowledge God’s role in any aspect of his life.

Towards the end of “Serenity,” Book questions his faith and his presence on Serenity: he tells Inara that he attacked the law-man that he had sworn to protect, watched him get murdered, and didn’t even think it was wrong. And Inara comforts him by telling him that he’s exactly where he belongs. Book doubts himself and the strength of his religion, just like Mal had done; however, Book goes down a different road from Mal because the crew of Serenity helps him to reaffirm his faith in God. Perhaps if Mal had the security of his crew to fall back on directly after the Battle of Serenity Valley, his doubts of God would have been temporary; as it is however, Mal had to build himself a familial support system before he could begin to rebuild his faith in the world.

Inara – The Ambassador

Mal and Inara have many similar characteristics which lead to their mutual attraction, but also make them unable to act upon their desires. Both Mal and Inara have pasts that they do not speak about, and while Inara never directly says it, the viewer and the rest of the crew can tell that she is living on Serenity in order to escape from the life she had been living in the Companion's Training House on Sihnon. Inara’s old friend,

Nandi, tells Mal during the episode “Heart of Gold” that she can’t figure out why Inara would have left the training house because she had been so successful there that she was sure to be appointed House Priestess within the next few years. When asked by an Alliance office if she is living on Serenity in order to run away from something, Inara replies: “We’re all running away from something” (“Bushwhacked”). During Inara’s introductory scene in “Serenity,” she is shown talking with a client; he asks her to describe Sihnon, and she does, quiet happily, except there is a brief moment where her face falls, and the viewer can see, just for a second, Inara’s true feelings of loneliness and regret. It is not clear what causes Inara’s problems, but it is evident that she and Mal both have histories that they wish to escape from, and for both of them, Serenity is the answer.

The biggest problem that arises between Inara and Mal is that while they are both extremely attracted to one another, they are unable to act upon their attraction because it would go against their core identifying characteristics: Mal would never be able to be in a relationship with Inara while she is still a companion, but Inara cannot stop being a companion because it is part of her identity, which she is proud of and enjoys. Inara and Mal are equally matched when it comes to bantering about their mutual disdain for the other’s career choice. When Mal is attending a grand ball that Inara is attending with a client, he asks her “Is this the hardest part, would you say, or does that come later?” to which she responds, “You have no call to try to make me ashamed of my job. What I do is legal... and how is that smuggling coming?” Unable to let Inara take the last stab, Mal quickly retorts, “My work is illegal, but at least it’s honest” (“Shindig”). The constant scornful repartee is the only way that Mal and Inara are able to comfortably communicate, which is why Mal is able to recognize that Inara is being used as bait for his crew when the Operative, a government trained assassin trying to retrieve River, forces her to ask for Mal’s help, and the two of them have an entire conversation without arguing once.

River—The Scar

River is a challenge for Mal in the beginning of *Firefly* because he does not know how to classify her. All of the other people on the ship serve some purpose, either as a crewmember or as a paying passenger, but River is different: not only does she attract serious unwanted Alliance attention, but she causes problems on the ship as well. Kaylee is shot during “Serenity” when an Alliance mole overreacts while trying to take River into custody; River slices Jayne’s chest open when he is wearing a “Blue Sun” t-shirt for no apparent reason; Jayne attempts to betray Mal’s trust and sell River and Simon out to federal officers while the crew is pulling a job on a central planet. All of these things should logically make Mal resist keeping River on his crew, but he identifies with her in a way that he can with no one else. For Mal, River is a literal symbol for the abuse of power and torture that regular people receive from the Alliance. Mal does not know what to do with this symbol aboard his ship, but sheltering River is an active rebellion against the Alliance, and for a while, that is simply good enough for Mal. When Mal looks at River, he sees a reflection of the damage the Alliance inflicted on him, and tries to create a comfortable safe haven for her, just as he has done for himself.

While Mal and River rarely interact in one-on-one conversations, their closeness is emphasized through the mental connection that is apparent between the two of them. It is demonstrated several times through the course of the show that River is a “reader,” or a psychic, and while this gets a wide range of reactions, from Jayne’s dislike of anyone knowing what’s going on in his head, to Wash scoffing at it because the idea is “too science fiction,” to which his wife, Zoe, points out that he lives in a space ship (“Out of Gas”), to a remote village of Christians who try to burn her for being a witch (“Safe”). River is never able to control her ability, and often is unable to deal with the emotions and knowledge that she senses; however, the one person who she shares a consistent connection with is Mal. During a scene in “Safe,” Mal, Jayne and Book get caught in a gun fight while River participating in a country dance in the local town. Book is shot, but nobody notices at first; however, as soon as Mal sees Book, River knows also, and falls out of step with the dance. She doesn’t feel it when Book is shot, because as much time as the two of them spend together, it is Mal that she has a mental connection with, not Book. At end of *Serenity*, as the two of them prepare to fly the ship out of orbit, Mal is

telling River the secrets of keeping the ship running. He says “But you already know what I’m going to say,” and she replies very sweetly, “Yes, but I like to hear you say it.”

One Big Happy Family

Some of the most important and memorable scenes of *Firefly* and *Serenity* take place around the dining table: the crew decides what to do with Simon and River when they first discover their fugitive status, whether or not to take the high yielding job with the double-crossing Saffron, as well as the debate to push through dangerous Reaver territory to gain the secret of the planet Miranda that had been eating at River’s subconscious, as well as several dinner scenes full of good food and lots of laughs. The reason that these scenes are so valuable is because it confirms all of efforts that Mal has been working towards for years. He has finally succeeded in building a family and a home; the members often disagree and sometimes even fight, and they are constantly looking for jobs to sustain themselves, but at the end of the day, they’re still flying, which is all that really matters. Mal has created a safe haven where he can be free from Alliance manipulation and be surrounded by people he trusts and relates to.

While Zoe could probably kill Mal with little real effort, she also is able to teach him how to balance the fighting life with the family life. Kaylee inspires Mal on a daily basis because her unflagging cheerfulness and love remind him that there is always hope, while Simon reflects Mal’s stubbornness and drive to avoid Alliance detection. Jayne’s presence aboard Serenity is also valuable because it allows Mal to compare himself against Jayne’s relatively immoral lifestyle and encourage him to remain true to his preferred moral codes. Jayne offers an image of a Mal who had not been concerned enough about the war to fight in it, and Wash offers a parallel image, not of negligent disregard for current affairs, but of an image that is easy-going enough to assume that life would turn out well enough in the long run. Inara and Book both represent parts of Mal’s life that he feels unable to accept or act upon, which is part of the reason that these are the two members of the crew who

voluntarily leave the ship before *Serenity* starts. River represents the aspect of Mal's life that he has the most trouble dealing with, and in the end it takes multiple suicide missions, an epic space battle between literal manifestations of civilization and chaos, and several casualties for the two of them to work out their issues with the Alliance.

Mal's Character Arc

While Whedon's portrayal of Mal in *Firefly* was limited due to episode time limits, budget and the cancellation of the series, *Serenity* afforded Whedon free reign to depict Mal the way he had originally intended to. In a 2005 interview with San Francisco Gate, Whedon said about *Serenity*: "I've gotten a certain amount of closure that I didn't have when the series was canceled. The movie delivers what I want to deliver the way I want to deliver it -- with action, violence, humor and fun. I'll feel we told the story we wanted to tell" (qtd. in Chonin). Viewers also received a sense of closure at the close of *Serenity*: we more fully understand the crewmembers of *Serenity*, we learn what really happened with River, and most importantly, we see Mal's character arc go from a broken ex-soldier with nothing to live for other than his ship and crew, to a man who is willing to fight and die for a cause that he thinks is truly important.

Because the film had to be understandable by viewers who were unfamiliar with the series, Whedon had to write it so that the beginning of the film partially cancels out the ending of *Firefly*: the tension between Mal and Simon is back as strong as it ever was, with the only main difference being that both Inara and Book gone. Mal finds something to "believe in," as Book tells him to, and in doing so he regains something that he had been missing for a long time: something to fight for. Book convinces Mal the importance of having faith, not necessarily in religion, but in anything. Mal and Book find a middle ground that they can meet on about religion, and in doing so, Mal heals the wound that had plagued him since the Independents lost the war.

In accomplishing his goal of exposing the Alliance for what it is, a corporation-driven entity that cares absolutely nothing for individual rights, Mal loses Wash and Book, the representations of his light-hearted and religious qualities, but only after both men accomplish great things. Wash safely flies Serenity out of a battlefield where two separate armies are trying to kill them, and lands even though Serenity is greatly disabled. Book shoots down the Alliance ship that massacres his settlement, Haven. He uses force to get his revenge, just. The film ends with Mal and River flying Serenity together, not being chased by the Alliance, which is all the two of them have ever asked for: freedom and companionship.

Fan's Undying Devotion

There have been many television series and films that have become cult favorites, ones that are not necessarily popular with the majority of people, but are greatly beloved by a small group of people. For *Firefly* and *Serenity*, this group of fans is the Browncoats, who still, years after the film came out, continue to support the film by recruiting fans and keeping the fan websites running.

The Browncoats haven't remained so fiercely loyal to Whedon's science fiction/western simply because of its innovative plots, its realistic humor or its approachable characters. Browncoats love the *Firefly* and *Serenity* so much because, when they look at Mal, they are able to identify with him. In a culture that idealizes materialism, inhuman beauty standards, corrupt politicians, talentless celebrities and the mindless pursuit of the American Dream, everyone can identify with Mal's need to create a space for himself in the world by trying to reassemble the parts of his identity that have been destroyed through his interactions with civilization. Mal, and the rest of Serenity's crew, are the kinds of people who don't care how society defines them; they are the ones who strongly stand apart from the rest of society and give everyone else hope that they too can live their lives as fully realized individuals. Fans' love for *Firefly* proves that there is a strong unit of viewers who rely on

television not only to provide entertainment, but also to provide for them a set of inspiring, realistic characters who they can relate to.

Nathan Fillion, the actor who plays Mal, explains the biggest reason why he loves *Firefly*: “Others have trouble putting their finger on [what makes *Firefly* good], but I see in their eyes a little *Firefly* burning. I understand, my friend. You ask me? It’s family. A group of people who, though flawed, would cross through hell for each other. For you. You’re feeling what I was feeling. I understand. I was the captain” (Fillion 53). Fillion has played many different roles during his acting career, but he tells fans that the greatest thing that they can do for him if they see him is to call him “Captain” because, for him, being part of *Firefly* was a life changing experience. It’s easy to see why audiences enjoy *Firefly*: it gives them a sense of hope because Whedon presents them with a realistic vision of the future that, while still not perfect, contains real people who face real obstacles and come up with real solutions.

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