

Conquering Evil with Empathy: River Tam's Radical Empathy in *Firefly* and *Serenity*

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Throughout the many works of Joss Whedon, there is an undercurrent of distrust in governments and institutions of authority. As Sherry Ginn states in her work *Power and Control in Television Worlds of Joss Whedon*, “Joss Whedon examined how power can corrupt those who use it, from a rogue Slayer to an unbalanced girl [River Tam]. From a government bent on controlling its populace to two corporations intent on restricting power to a select and wealthy few” (9). This is readily observed in *Firefly* with the Alliance, the unopposed ruling body of the 'verse, along with Blue Sun, a somewhat shady corporation more often than not seen only as a logo stamped on products as diverse as food cans and t-shirts (“Blue Sun Corporation”). Throughout the series we see each commit a number of heinous crimes against people, including the Alliance's drugging of an entire planet in an attempt to make the populace more compliant.¹ The Alliance is not a succor to its people, but a hindrance, as revealed by its authoritarian nature and socioeconomic structure.² The hyper-capitalist 'verse seems offensive to Captain Malcolm (Mal) Reynolds' sense of justice and his actions in *Firefly* show the

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audience how inescapable the brutality of such a system is.

Firefly makes clear that much of the 'verse is characterized by deep economic inequities. The contrast in the infrastructure that created the wealth of the Central Planets and the poverty of those on the Rim is the main example.³ As the audience we observe both, from wealthy men and women and their interactions with the Companion Inara Serra, to those who are worked to death in the mines. However, the most clearly defined phantom in the 'verse is the Reavers, who are eventually revealed in the film *Serenity* to be both a product and a victim of hyper-capitalism. Jeremy Rifkin notes that a hyper-capitalist economy is “steeped in access relationships[;] virtually all of our time is commodified” (9-10). In such an economic system every action has a monetary value, and one's time and effort demand compensation. Such a system places the acquisition of wealth and objects as overriding all else in a person's life: private, social, and leisure time become completely consumed in this pursuit, eroding the bonds between people in their communities and turning human interaction into an exchange of goods and services. Human relationships become devalued for the pursuit of profit, which becomes the ultimate goal in all human interactions.

This assessment fits well with how Reavers treat other people they encounter. Everything is consumable to a Reaver, even, or especially, other human bodies. Reavers do not value human life aside from the way they can extract value from it, whether it be as food, entertainment, or a demonstration of power. As J. Michael Richardson and J. Douglas Rabb state in their essay “Reavers and Redskins: Creating the Frontier Savage,” Reavers are often interpreted as savage and purely chaotic, but the latter is countered in the way the crew of

Firefly has an almost formulaic method to respond to Reavers when they encounter them. Mal is often able to predict their actions from previous encounters, explaining their seemingly incomprehensible behavior to the crew. He even explains how one person responds after witnessing the horror of their brutality, which is to become a Reaver himself (“Bushwhacked” 1.3). Mal is emotionally hardened by the atrocities committed by the Reavers—he saw much brutality in the War for Independence⁴—but his detachment does not help defeat them. The Alliance uses the Reavers for its own benefit, although it cannot control them. The only person able to defeat the Reavers is River Tam, a young girl victimized by Alliance scientists in their efforts to create controllable and programmable people.⁵ Despite her weaponization, River serves as the symbolic embodiment of radical empathy, which is the solution for the problematic rule of hyper-capitalism.

Terri E. Givens defines empathy as the “ability to see the world from another person’s perspective, in order to understand their feelings and life experiences” (1). Radical empathy, she says, takes empathy “a step further, encouraging each of us not only to understand the feelings of others, but also to be motivated to create the change that will allow all of us to benefit from economic property and develop the social relationships that are beneficial to our emotional wellbeing” (1). Thus, to connect with other people, especially people who are different, one must actively consider the other’s point of view. Someone who possesses radical empathy is able to understand the roots of another’s, even their enemy’s, position, yet have a strong enough sense of themselves that they do not get lost in this viewpoint or make excuses for their or their opposition’s behavior. Radical empathy would thus be the opposite of what a hyper-capitalist culture encourages in

its population. Instead of viewing others as commodities or potential for profit, the very act of seeing the personhood in another who is different or seems monstrous is a radical act.

This ideal of embodying radical empathy becomes more difficult when life experiences have been unpleasant or abusive. Society often marginalizes those with trauma or a history of abuse, making them more disconnected from people and the culture as a whole. Engaging in an empathic connection with others despite this disconnection is subverting cultural expectations of how an “abused” person is supposed to function in society and highlighting a different path for those who have suffered trauma. Although the subject of trauma in the Whedonverses has been studied in detail, recently in works such as *Slaying Is Hell: Essays on Trauma and Memory in the Whedonverse*, it will not be developed in this essay. Rather I explore herein River’s victimization in relation to her ability to empathize with others.

The creation of the Reavers took place on the planet Miranda, where the population was exposed to the drug G-23 Paxilon Hydrochlorate, more commonly known as Pax, and those few who did not die transformed into Reavers. Overly isolated, even from the other Rim ~~Central~~ Planets, Miranda’s population makes a perfect test subject for the Alliance’s governmental ambitions. After the creation of the Reavers, Miranda becomes even more isolated, becoming the heart of “Reaver Territory.” The Alliance uses the monsters it created in its dark, unethical experiment to protect the secret of their creation, and it turns the victims of its crimes into a perceived oppressor. The Reavers serve the Alliance’s best interest, which is to have the Reavers exist, while simultaneously choosing not to formally acknowledge their existence.

People on the Central Planets have only heard of Reavers in stories. Many believe they are fictional entirely, but the further you stray from the Central Planets and Alliance-protected areas, the more real they become, and in the case of many Rim Planets, they are a constant threat. In *Serenity* we see beautiful open-air classrooms, large, impressive skyscrapers, and immaculate top-of-the-line hospitals on the Central Planets, which are at the heart of Alliance control. These images are illustrative of the Alliance being the “beacon of civilization” (*Serenity* 00:00:58-00:01:00). Hence the Alliance’s reaction to such a heinous tragedy caused by their own hubris inverts the expectation of the viewer. The Alliance is run by humans and introduced as civilized by virtue of their wealth and use of Western symbols of power and culture. Gareth Hadyk-Delodder and Laura Chilcoat state:

As boundaries between civilization/barbarism are torn down, it becomes clear that the Reavers were *the* catalyst for the Alliance’s colonial project: by creating a monstrous Other, by actively repressing it from cultural consciousness, and by sublimating narratives of its existence by talking instead about the “dangers” of the uncivilized outer planets who “rejected” enlightenment, the Alliance is able to perpetuate and define its rule. (45)

This contrast between what we perceive to be “civilized” and the Alliance’s actual behavior makes them beyond the standard “meddl[ing]” authority as stated in the movie *Serenity* (00:01:47), and instead transforms them also into the “monstrous” that Hadyk-Delodder and Chilcoat describe. This monstrousness comes from the complete lack of empathy

from an establishment that has almost complete control over others.

Alliance authorities claim they wish to spread the light of civilization to as many planets and people as possible, but it appears as if hunger for complete power and control over others motivates them, in the way Reavers hunger for human flesh. Further drawing a connection between the Reavers and the Alliance, despite the difference in how they present themselves, is the similar way they are emotionally unmoved by human suffering and the way they actively destroy the lives and bodies of others to achieve their goals. As the Reavers' relentless hunger knows no satisfaction, they must leave Miranda to seek more lands and people to exploit and conquer. This reads a great deal like the way wealthy capitalists are not content in exploiting their own population, but journey beyond their own borders for more people and lands to exploit, mostly seeking out the most vulnerable, or in the 'verse, the Rim Planets and lone ships with little defense. Since these populations are viewed as past the borders of civilization, their suffering is minimalized, going largely unnoticed by the power structures that created their oppressors and benefited from their oppression. The victims of the Reavers are people who are literally on the margins of society or the Alliance's definition of "civilization," which translates into "barely human" by Central Planet standards. This is something that most modern-day audiences can relate to, since our current model of economic inequities arguably mirrors this system and relies on our indifference in order to exist. As Jocelyn Sakal Froese and Laura Buzzard state:

To be sure, the Alliance does not visibly interfere in the everyday lives of Rim inhabitants, but the Central

planets are no less responsible for the overall shape of lives on the Rim: we are told that the planets have been “terraformed to support human life” (*Serenity*). This means that conditions on the Rim have been, quite literally, produced by state power. The frontier of the ‘verse is thus neither a space beyond civilization nor its expanding edge, but is instead a marginal space within the state. (¶9)

The Reavers are a defining part of the “landscape” that Froese and Buzzard discuss (¶5). The Alliance’s Central Planet citizens, like many privileged people in the global North’s population, are shielded from the horrors of the Reavers’ ruthless exploitation of the marginalized despite the fact that they directly benefit from their exploitation. They are given enough information to know that things are worse the further you go from the Central Planets and are allowed to simultaneously maintain their ignorance of life outside the Core and their fear of it.

The oppression of the Rim Planets and underdeveloped nations serves as a way of keeping power solidified within the Alliance. River defies not only what is expected of her as a result of Alliance scientists’ experiments by not becoming a monster herself, but she defies what is encouraged in the average Central Planet citizen. She openly feels and fights for the oppressed who have no voice at all. For example, the people of Miranda are dead and unable to speak for themselves. Likewise, the Reavers have devolved into such savage beings as a result of the Pax that they are unable to speak for themselves as well. River takes upon herself the burden of fighting the systemic indifference pushed on the

people of the 'verse to obtain justice for the marginalized at the cost of her own safety and mental health.

Like the Reavers on Miranda, River's powers were also created in an isolated environment. On the false pretense of enrolling in a rigorous academic program, the agents of the Alliance isolate her from her family and experiment on her. Both River and the people of Miranda are lured by promises of a better life; River's parents trust in the promise of an education that would give her more options for her future. Instead, she and Miranda's citizens are turned into weapons to be used to support the regime or they die. The creation of Reavers was originally an unintended consequence on Miranda but was quickly appropriated as a tool into the existing power structure. Margaret Shane explores this in her article "River Tam as Schizoanalysand in Joss Whedon's *Firefly* Narratives," stating that:

Whedon establishes the full horror and depravity of the Alliance's bio-power ambitions. The Alliance discovered the Reavers' becoming animal by chance; now they seek to produce remotely triggered Reaver hybrid assassins at will. How do you make more Reavers? You make them watch a fact established in the episode "Bushwacked" (1.3). (26)

There is no attempt to amend the behavior that resulted in such loss, and in the case of the Reavers, the perversion of human life, but rather a ruthless desire to more accurately control their creation and make them better tools. On the other hand, Reavers look like what western viewers would come to associate with barbarism, which makes their behavior easier to rationalize.⁶ Shane continues, "In those intervening

years, the Alliance has buried the Miranda catastrophe and embarked on experimentation on its own citizens in an attempt to create controllable, deployable Reavers. And it works” (28). River is one of the results of the Alliance's attempts to create a “deployable Reaver.” She is subjected to the same formula, as she is forced to watch Reaver atrocities in her mind, without the ability to stop the images she is seeing.

Yet River is not a mindless, sadistic Reaver. She is her own person and becomes the most effective weapon against them. She takes the painful experiences from what she was forced to watch to learn Reaver weaknesses and fight them on a level no other person has shown. She takes the victimhood forced upon her and uses it against those who would hurt her. Instead of joining the ranks of the weaponized humans as the Alliance intended, and have created in the past, she becomes the one person who can eliminate them. At the very start of the movie *Serenity*, we see the Alliance state their intentions in making River “ideal for defense deployment” (00:02:36) and Doctor Mathias stating that River “is not just a psychic, given the right trigger, this girl is a living weapon” (00:02:53-57). Despite their previous creation of the Reavers, the Alliance is still experimenting on their own people, stripping away their free will and mental stability in order to make them better tools for violence. This experimentation on River shows that she is using not only her exceptional mind, but her personal experiences, which are similar to what happened to the Reavers. Both River's connection to the Reavers, through lived experience, and her love for her brother and friends, allow her to be the much needed hero to fight the very thing she was expected to become.

We can see her heroism not only in her ability to physically defeat the Reavers in combat, but her ability to

predict their behavior and understand their motivations. We see this in the movie *Serenity*, when the Reavers are chasing Mal's shuttle at the start of the movie, and Jayne asks, "How come they aren't blowing us out of the air?!" (00:21:32-34). River quietly responds, "They want us alive when they eat us" (00:21:38-40). River does not share the desire of the Reavers to maim and kill others, but her ability to pick up on their intense rage is what allowed her to alert the crew to their presence in the movie *Serenity*. Later in the film she states, "Reavers. They're all made up of rage [...]. I can't shut them up" (01:34:03-07). She feels their rage when they come into proximity to her, but instead of embracing it, she rejects it. She uses her ability to feel their intense hatred to protect herself and the people she cares about without being consumed by it or allowing that rage to change who she is.

Despite what they have done to River, the Alliance's promises are not always lies. There is an educational system for the elite of the Central Planets, just as real job opportunities do also exist for settlers across the 'verse. The Alliance provides a structure that has benefits for people, though not evenly distributed, as we can see from the success of River's brother, Simon. Both River and Simon are raised with the promise of safety and opportunity from their wealthy background, exceptional performance in school, and inhabiting of a Central Planet. While Simon is able to live out that promise in attending some of the best schools in the 'verse and becoming a renowned physician, River is not only stripped of her agency, but everything she has been implicitly promised as a child. These abuses by the Alliance stem from the belief that such sacrifices are necessary to maintain the order they have established, supposedly for the good of all.

Jeffery Bussolini notes in his work “A Geopolitical Interpretation of *Serenity*” that:

In the case of River’s treatment as laboratory animal, and the fate of those on Miranda, the Alliance is concerned with the control and use of “biological life,” “life itself,” and “bare life.” River’s fundamental human rights count for naught next to the state imperative of developing a human weapon... The rights and the memories of the Miranda settlers were similarly quashed in the search for better regulation of biological life. (151)

These abuses are justified by prioritizing order over the humanity of individuals. The complete lack of empathy towards their victims shows this value system to the extreme.

Though River is the Alliance’s creation, she does not mirror this ideology in her treatment of others. She is the quintessential “weaponized woman” that Michael Marano discusses in his work “River Tam and the Weaponized Women of the Whedonverse.” River’s captors are able to alter her abilities but are not able to change who she is as a human being. Marano explains:

River’s talent, her remarkableness, her spirit is a necessary component of her weaponization. In the Whedonverse, weaponization is partly Patriarchal appropriation of something that belongs essentially to the woman being weaponized. This can be some inner capacity, a latent talent [...]. (42)

The exceptionalism that is needed to make River a useful weapon becomes the very thing that turns her into a danger to

the Alliance when she escapes. Marano asserts s, “With her inner capacity weaponized and commandeered, River became a danger to the very Patriarchal authority that made her a weapon” (44). Her escape itself is an act of resistance against the forces that created her.

A part of her exceptionalism is her radical empathy and care for others despite the fact she is viewed and treated as an outsider among nearly any community she joins. In the episode “Safe” (1.5), we see the first hint of River being more than just a telepath, but an empath. When she is dancing, she stops when Shepherd Book has been shot, reeling in pain as if it were her body that had taken a bullet. The extreme pain and shock prevent her from seeing the intentions of some nearby men who kidnap her brother and her. She has put the pain of others above herself, and she suffers as a result. This is not just dangerous for her own health in the short term, but dangerous to the patriarchal authoritarian structure the Alliance has established. If citizens of the Central Planets place the well-being of others above their own comfort, that would greatly disrupt and potentially dismantle the corrupt power structures in place. Later in the episode we see River actively engaging in this disruption on a smaller scale by speaking for a little girl who has gone mute and, literally, has no voice. River directly calls out the current corrupt leader of the small town for the murder of its previous leader. These acts get River labeled as a “witch” and nearly burned at the stake. Not just River’s telepathy, but her empathy, and her desire to speak for those who have been silenced, are what make her such a powerful and disruptive force, and ultimately the only one who can save the ’verse from both the Reavers and the Alliance.

This empathy has its costs on River's health and ability to socialize with the people to whom she is so deeply emotionally connected. River overtly mentions this struggle in *Serenity* when she is unearthing the secrets she discovers about the people of Miranda: "It isn't mine. The memory, it isn't mine, and I shouldn't have to carry it. It isn't mine. Don't make me sleep again" (00:43:22-30). Her mind houses a large number of contradictions, and this comes across in her struggles to communicate. She has to hold space in her mind for not only thoughts and feelings, but pain and sickness. This becomes clear in "Objects in Space" (1.14) when Mal speaks to Simon about River's condition and says that it appears to be getting worse.

When Jubal Early approaches the ship, River appears to deteriorate when she finds herself in his mind space. She hears his thoughts, knows his feelings, and takes them as her own and emulates his condition without becoming it. Jubal Early, like River, has information or an understanding of things that are hidden from the audience. This is shown in the mysterious comments he makes throughout the episode, from the scene when he looks at Shepherd Book and states, "That ain't a Shepherd" (00:26:38-39) to knowing exactly how to threaten the crew members with whom he interacts to bring out the maximum amount of fear in them. He threatens Kaylee, "the lusty mechanic" (Buckman 42) with torture and rape and threatens River by saying he will hurt Simon, but his knowledge ends there. He does not have an emotional connection with the crew and lacks the abilities that River has to undo harm. As pointed out, Early cannot connect emotionally with anyone. As River explains later, "Your mother knew. Sadness in her when she waved goodbye. She's relieved. Saw a darkness in you. You're not well" (00:37:06-18).

River is able to undo Early's work by talking with the crew members, acknowledging their feelings and fears, and helping each push past them to undo the terror Early inspired in each. Early threatens Kaylee with extreme violence if she attempts to muck up his plans, yet River is able to inspire confidence in Kaylee so she can move past her fear to fight against Early and protect the crew. River's emotional knowledge is vast enough to overcome previous prejudices of her mental state, and she is able to mobilize terrified crew members into saving the ship. She empathizes with Early and uses her ability to connect with him in order to trick him into leaving *Serenity*, telling him "I'm going with you [...]. Don't belong. Dangerous like you. Can't be controlled. Can't be trusted. Everyone can go on without me and not have to worry" (00:38:47-39:07).

River's directly highlighting the commonalities between herself and Early only more starkly contrasts what completely different paths these two social outcasts have taken. Both have difficulties communicating with others, which only enhances their status as outsiders. However, Early is cruel and takes pleasure in bringing fear to others, while River desires to help people despite the fact that she will never be fully accepted by them. We are able to see this inability to connect and effectively communicate with others in conversations between Early and the crew throughout the episode, such as when Simon asks if Early belongs to the Alliance and he responds with, "I don't think of myself as a lion. You might as well though. I have a mighty roar" (00:23:37-44). Early uses this difficulty in communication to amplify the terror he inspires in people, making it clear that he will not be reasoned with. Another example of this is when Inara tries to dissuade him and he hits her demanding, "Don't go visiting my intentions. Not ever" (00:29:54-30:01). His interactions with the crew show

the dangers of being “different” regardless of how talented you are. When Mal asks River how she knows what Early is going to do she says, “I’m close to him, and he doesn’t even see it” (00:36:26-30). Through this closeness she knows the danger that Jubal Early presents better than any of the crew and is able to hold that knowledge and their fears in order to acknowledge it and to work past it. She also knows what it is like to be an outsider, like Early, and how that does not automatically make his position an honorable one. She empathizes without excusing his behavior, setting him loose in space to physically manifest the isolation he has always felt among others. River has both scientific knowledge and emotional understanding of others and is able to cope with contradictions and make sense of them, which is why she is able to defeat not just Early, but the Reavers as well.

The crew of *Serenity* is forced to deal with Reavers as they avoid the areas where the Reavers run rampant. Though they are still technically in Alliance-controlled territory, the Alliance cannot actually be seen enforcing any sort of order or attempting to protect the people of the area. Aside from River, each member of the crew is unable to effectively defeat these merciless predators, further supporting my contention that River’s radical empathy is the only thing strong enough to defeat the Reavers. River can sense and feel the emotions of others, and though she feels the explosive rage that has consumed the Reavers, it does not lead her to violence. Instead, she uses her ability to feel to protect others and defeat the Reavers who threaten her and the crew of *Serenity*.

For example, Simon Tam is presented as the quintessential knowledgeable “cultural elite,” being raised in a wealthy and loving family in the heart of the Central Planets. He and his sister are able to choose from the best

institutions to study and have access to many resources, as we see in the flashback in *Serenity*. Simon is considered to be one of the most intellectually gifted people on the ship, aside from River, and the most formally educated, being “book smart” even by Central Planet standards. As Alyson R. Buckman states, Simon is “a man of science” (44). His inability to defeat the Reavers exposes the weaknesses of a purely logical approach. His education is useless in the face of the Reavers, and he refers to them as “campfire stories” in “*Serenity*” (1.1, 00:54:48-50). Simon demonstrates how logic or a scientific approach alone is not capable of defeating the Reavers. Simon and what he represents Central Planets elite are created through deliberate ignorance and misinformation despite being given a top tier education on a Central Planet.

Jayne’s response to the Reavers is one of the most extreme. Throughout the series and film, we see him face many high risk and dangerous situations. He is willing to enter a fire or fist fight whenever he believes the situation demands it, which is most of the time. However, this physical courage does not carry over to his feelings about the Reavers and how he handles them. Sarah Corsie explains that “The disturbing nature of the Reavers is more familiar to Jayne than to the rest of the crew, which makes them even more frightening to him, because they enhance the inhumane aspects of his own personality” (13). His “familiarity” does not help Jayne in relation to the Reavers but rather hurts him. His fear is stronger than any desire and offers no solution to the Reaver problem. Throughout the series Jayne is depicted as a ruthless, self-interested character who would do anything, including sell out his boss and partners, to make a profit. In “Jaynestown” (1.7) we learn that Jayne had once partnered

with someone named Stitch. They had been working together for over six months when they decided to rob the Magistrate of Canton. When “things went, way south” (00:8:25-27), Jayne threw Stitch out of the shuttle they had stolen after the robbery, leaving Stitch injured and then arrested. After Stitch is released from confinement, he recounts to the crowd that had gathered:

Our plane took a hit and we’re goin’ down. We dumped the fuel reserve, dumped the life support, hell, we even dumped the seats! And there’s Jayne, the money and me, and there was no way he was going to drop that money! [...] He tossed me out first! (00:36:44-37:06)

Jayne, much like the Reavers, shows a callous disregard for human life and the basic culturally established creed that you support your partner. Stitch howls in disgust. “You protect the man you’re with, you watch his back. Everybody knows that!” (00:37:16-22). The audience, the Mudders, a group of indentured servants who are not properly paid for their work and whose lives are depicted as worse than most in the ‘verse, stare back at him blankly. Stitch is appealing to the Mudder community and their culture of looking after their own when they already have so little. The Mudders reflect this behavior in the lavish way they treat Jayne upon his return to their community. But Stitch is right, Jayne was loath to drop the money, despite the fact that he knew the Mudders needed it more. Not only that, but he discarded his own partner in an attempt to keep the money. Jayne later tries to sell Simon and River to the Alliance, even knowing that River, a seventeen-year-old girl, had been held against her will and tortured by them (“Ariel” 1.9). Taking not only their lives but sentencing

both Simon and River to torture and most likely a very painful death did not stop Jayne from wanting to turn a profit at their expense. He is the crew member who mirrors the Reavers' values in that he is selfish, thinking only of himself (and his family),⁷ and he usually acts in an almost instinctive fashion as a result. Yet because of this similarity, Jayne is the one who is the first to run, illustrating that instinctive knowledge, like Simon's book learning, is useless against the Reavers' monstrosity.

Mal, "the man of action" as Buckman calls him (44), is able to predict the Reavers' movements and wants to provide a solution that is practical and straightforward: stay as far away from them as possible. When forced to interact with Reavers, he shows an understanding of how Reavers behave yet even he cannot actually solve the problem of Reavers; he does not hope to defeat them, just avoid them. This strategy is illustrated in "Bushwhacked," (1.3) in which Mal showcases his deep understanding of Reaver behavior by describing the step-by-step process of the survivor-turned-Reaver and is able to track him down and kill him. Mal has a great deal of practical knowledge; however, this does not make him equipped for handling a full-fledged Reaver interaction. His success is explained by the fact that the Reaver survivor is still in the process of transformation from human to Reaver and is extremely weak from days of starvation and recent self-mutilation. Despite Mal's understanding of their instinctual, violent behavior, he has no emotional understanding of their existence and cannot conceive of a world where such behavior is human. Mal states this when he weighs in on a discussion his crew has in "Bushwhacked": "Reavers ain't men. They forgot how to be. They're just nothing. They got out to the edge of the galaxy to that place of nothing and that's what they

became” (00:21:29-39). His emotional detachment from the Reavers may make their crimes easier for him to cope with, as trying to empathize with such behavior is painful. He labels them as “nothing,” which allows him to continue with his life, as Reaver behavior is beyond categorization.

Hoban Washburne’s interaction with Reavers is a step further in the “avoidance” route, as his primary interaction with Reavers is to very skillfully run away. Some of his most impressive feats as a pilot are displayed when the Reavers are pursuing them. Zoë Washburne does not interact directly with Reavers until they murder her husband in *Serenity*. When the crew agrees to hold off the Reavers so that Mal can inform the world of the way the Reavers were created, she and Jayne are the first line of defense the Reavers encounter. Zoë, fueled by righteous anger and desire for vengeance, does something exceptional for her character: she defies a direct order from Mal and breaks the line to fight the Reavers on her own. Yet, her rage, pain, and absolutely understandable desire for revenge do nothing to defeat the Reavers. The trope of the hero motivated by tragedy defeating the enemy by sheer force of will gained from the power of their grief is a common one we have come to expect. However, Zoë fails, showing that fighting with vindicated anger and loss is not enough. Suffering, loss, and retribution do not defeat the Reavers, and only cause Zoë to put herself and the remainder of the people she cares about in further danger.

After Zoë's injury, the crew loses ground against the Reavers. They fall back, and what started as Zoë's being injured results in Kaylee and Simon's being hurt as well. River sees their injuries and is affected by their pain. She looks at Simon and says, “You always take care of me. My turn” (*Serenity* 01:41:32-41). She then jumps into a room filled with

Reavers. Her last act before the door shuts behind her is to throw Simon's bag of medical supplies through the rapidly closing space that was also her only chance for escape. She risks her body to obtain the tools to heal the bodies of others. This empathy allows for River to do what knowledge, physical strength, revenge, and pain could not, which is to be found alive, uninjured, and surrounded by the bodies of the Reavers who fought her. She single-handedly defeated them, making River, as Buckman calls her, "River the Reaver Slayer" (48).

River's motivation is her empathic connection to others and her love. She loves Kaylee and her brother Simon, and her empathy with their pain allows her to throw herself into a room full of vicious creatures and emerge victorious. As Marano states, "It's this inner capacity that makes River and the other weaponized women *useful* as weapons. This capacity is subverted and rewritten by Patriarchal authority into something [...] lethal" (43). In this case, however, River is not using her weaponization as the Patriarchal authority intended but is reappropriating it to use her empathic connection to others to assert her own agency. Radical empathy is shown in this case as not just useful in defeating enemies in physical combat, but in undermining the social control asserted by the patriarchal authority through willfully asserting her own power by making her own choices.

Like the Reavers, River is a creation of the Alliance. She is first introduced as the victim of Alliance experiments, and as she tells her brother, "I understand. You gave up everything you had to find me; you found me broken" ("Safe," 00:32:56-33:02). She is viewed as, and overtly called, "crazy" many times throughout the series and her behavior and speech is viewed as incomprehensible. Margaret Shane explains that:

She must be a complication on the order of ‘Whatever shall we do with River?’ She must subvert other characters’ and the audience’s expectations governing what a seemingly frail, mentally unhinged female body can do. She must be a mystery to herself and to others.
(7)

River is seen as a problem to be solved and her incomprehensibility as dangerous. Her status is as someone who cannot be understood or controlled, and thus the information and help she attempts to provide is considered useless by extension. This fits with what many would expect a “victim” of such suffering to look like. This young woman was “broken” in the face of painful experiences, and everything she tries to do and articulate to others is painted with that expectation of what a victim should look like. As Buckman states:

Neither the man of science nor the man of action is able to understand River fully. While we may initially believe Simon’s diagnoses of his sister, when we look again we see that what seemed to be nonsense in River’s discourse made perfect sense. (44)

Such an observation illustrates how powerful labels like “crazy” or “victim” can be effective ways of silencing someone and undermining their own attempts of self-expression. Though the crew is well meaning, their labeling her with derogatory titles is also disempowering and further hinders her ability to help or communicate with them. Simon is able to scan River’s brain in “Ariel,” (1.9) and discovers that River’s amygdala has been stripped and that “she feels everything.

She can't not" (1.8, 00:26:15-17). Though this is not scientifically accurate, it is an attempt to apply a medical and scientific explanation for her disorganized and erratic behavior (see Ginn 87-89 for more about this). River's feelings and attempts to process conflicting emotions and desires all at once make her appear incomprehensible to the average person. Once the label of "crazy" has attached itself to someone, it is difficult for them to regain their credibility or to assert their identity. Though perhaps an unintended side effect of what the Alliance had done to River, an additional layer of obfuscation was created, and it prevents River from being able to effectively communicate information to others.

Just as River refuses to let the Alliance turn her into a weapon, she also refuses to be the victim her brother and much of the crew define her to be. Despite other's labels of her purpose or identity, her goal is to help people: from *Serenity's* crew to the exterminated population of Miranda. River is not just a genius in terms of intellectual capacity, but in her ability to empathize, to not become callous or desensitized to the suffering of others. As Marano explains, "Other-directed, family focused (or, more properly, 'crew focused') domestic issues override River's Patriarchal, 'meddling' weaponization so that she can be her own person, and reclaim those unique attributes that had been hijacked" (46). As discussed earlier, the Alliance inflicts her with these abilities due to her own exceptional nature, but it is that same exceptionalism that makes it impossible for them to turn her into the mindless tool that they had wanted. Instead, she is able to expand her empathy to anyone she encounters, regardless of whether they have good intentions or not. River does not become the enemy in order to defeat them, but

instead is a radical departure of the emotionally deadened that is the expectation of the 'verse.

As Buckman states:

Unlike River, the outcast Reavers remain victims, though vicious. River will sacrifice her safety and happiness for that of the crew if necessary, becoming for instance, River the Reaver Slayer in *Serenity*. She makes her decisions from a communal perspective rather than an isolated one and uses violence only to protect the crew and herself. (48)

Reavers, being simultaneously the victim and the aggressor, are not deserving of pure sympathy or pure hatred. They have suffered at the hands of the Alliance and its scientists, but that does not vindicate the way they hurt others. River has the ability to see the injustice of what has happened to them as well as the need for them to be destroyed in order to prevent them from harming themselves, killing others, or making others in the Reaver's image.⁸ Reavers did not have to become inherently evil, but they are a tool that committed evil acts, allowing them to perpetuate a system of oppression and hate that could only be stopped by their destruction. River's ability to defeat the Reavers is not from natural talents or privileges, like those possessed by many heroes, but from her personal experiences and suffering. Her experiences with betrayal and pain lead her to a type of empathy that talented sheltered types like Simon, or emotionally hardened characters like Jayne and Mal, cannot actualize. She does not let her experiences harden her or transform her into the monsters that hurt her. This transformation of the abused either becoming hopelessly broken or adopting the behavior of those

who hurt them is what American cinematic expectations set for us. River subverts these expectations by using her pain to help others, making River a symbol of radical empathy in the face of injustice and suffering, as it is this suffering that allows her to become a hero the 'verse deeply needs.

Notes

¹ Although never explicitly stated, it is plausible to consider that Blue Sun was involved in the manufacture of the Pax used on the population of Miranda.

² On the Alliance see, e.g., Sutherland and Swan; on Blue Sun, see, e.g., Giannini.

³ On the Central Planets versus those on the Rim, see, e.g., Hautsch.

⁴ This experience is referred to in the series, and more detail is given in the novel *Big Damn Hero*, by James Lovegrove.

⁵ Editors' note: For a different perspective on the Reavers, see Curry in this issue.

⁶ Editors' note: Cf. Curry in this issue.

⁷ We learn much more about Jayne and the way he feels about his family in Lovegrove's novel *The Magnificent Nine*.

⁸ See Lawrence Watt-Evans' "The Heirs of Sawney Beane."

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