

**“The Man They Call Jayne”:  
Emotional Development and the Family Structure in Joss Whedon’s *Firefly***

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[1] Interest in Joss Whedon’s *Firefly* TV series grew after its cancellation in 2002, and its plots, dialogue, and characters have since become subjects of scholarly consideration. *Firefly* scholar-fans and fan-scholars have written much meaningful analysis about the show and its characters—from feminist considerations of Inara, to interpretations of Mal’s sense of justice and freedom.<sup>1</sup> A void, however remains in the study of Jayne. Much of what is written about Jayne does not fully explore his internal struggles or crucial emotional development over the series and in the subsequent film, *Serenity*. Jayne is arguably the most dynamic character of *Firefly*, which becomes clear when his character in “The Train Job” (F1001) is compared with his character in *Serenity*. This essay will explore the evolution of Jayne’s emotional development through his gradual integration into the chosen family structure of the crew of *Serenity* over the course of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, by comparing and contrasting the competing moralities and personalities of Jayne, Mal, and Simon. Jayne’s interactions with Mal and Simon most directly contribute to his emotional and moral development, thus facilitating his transition from lone wolf to pack member. To complete the study of Jayne, this paper will rebut arguments made by several Whedon scholars about Jayne’s personality, loyalty, and morals through exploration and analysis of *Firefly* and *Serenity*.

[2] To avoid any confusion, the “morality” to which this paper refers requires clarification from the outset. Succinctly, morality is the set of beliefs one holds true regarding actions that constitute “right” behaviour versus that which is believed to be “wrong” behaviour. Jayne and Simon are at opposite ends of the morality spectrum in terms of their views on what is “right” and “wrong,” and Mal falls in the middle, setting the trio up with Mal as “father” and Simon and Jayne as his two “sons,” both of whom need attention, discipline, and guidance. Jayne appears to hold actions taken to preserve his own livelihood above all else. He is portrayed as believing the possession of money and/or goods is the key to his happiness, therefore his opportunistic morality consists of self-preservation, which ensures he can acquire more money and goods. Jayne’s proven ability to turn on his captain for a better deal, and his resistance to

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<sup>1</sup> For more on these topics, please read Dee Amy-Chinn’s article “‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore: Postfeminist Prostitution in Whedon’s *Firefly*?” first published in *Feminist Media Studies* Vol. 6.2, (June 2006): 175-190; and Amy H. Sturgis’ article “‘Just Get Us a Little Further’: Liberty and the Frontier in *Firefly* and *Serenity*” from *The Philosophy of Joss Whedon*, pp. 24-38.

developing emotional bonds with virtually anyone prevent Mal from integrating him into the chosen family of Serenity. Mal understands that while Jayne behaves this way he cannot be trusted, and the crew must be protected from him (particularly Simon and River). Therefore, Jayne is set up as exhibiting “wrong” behaviour as his primary personality trait. It is this barrier that Jayne must overcome through personal metamorphosis to be accepted as a chosen family member and soldier in Mal’s “platoon.”

[3] Mal’s battlefield morals conflict with his profession as thief and smuggler. In his heart, Mal sympathizes with poor folk and he is compelled to do that which is best for the underdog, particularly because helping “regular” folk often flies in the face of the Alliance. This ethos allows Mal to continue the war of the Independents in his own way. Sometimes the jobs he takes on, however, hit poor people the hardest. Mal counters this by refraining from finding out the details of his heists. Predictably, turning a blind eye rarely works, and Mal is often forced to make a decision between his morals and his need to pay his crew, with the crew usually losing out. Therefore, Mal’s morality is both “right” and “wrong,” depending upon the circumstances in which he finds himself. Through Mal’s example, we can see why Jayne resists developing relationships and sympathizing with other people. Such behaviour often prevents one from making dubious monetary gains, a problem about which Simon has little concern.

[4] Simon’s morality is defined by his family ties and profession. As a doctor, he is willing to do whatever he must to save lives. Simon equates morality with duty, and his duty is to serve others by preserving their health. Additionally, Simon’s strong bond with his sister causes him to be self-sacrificing and kind, which is juxtaposed to Jayne’s self-serving individualism. Unlike for Jayne, the ability to develop meaningful relationships comes easily to Simon and he is integrated into the chosen family structure almost immediately, which causes friction between Simon and Jayne. Therefore, Simon is driven by the “right” behaviours that allow him into the family structure and set him up as a classic “good guy.” Mal and Simon are straightforward characters from whom we can generally accept a certain set of behaviours, which is less the case with Jayne due to the evolution of his emotional self.

[5] Thus, the question of who Jayne really is lies at the heart of this article. On the surface Jayne is a gun-for-hire on Captain Malcolm Reynolds’s ship, Serenity. He provides the muscle that gets difficult jobs done, and is happy “as long as [he] get[s] paid” (“Ariel” F1008). Conversely, the show provides him with a tender side to offset this gruff exterior, one of the earliest examples being his subtle jealousy of Simon’s rapid acceptance into Serenity’s chosen family. Another example occurs in “The Message” (F1015) when he happily reads a letter from his mother and wears an (arguably) ridiculous hat she knitted for him with pride, despite the mockery he receives not only from his fellow shipmates, but also from an Alliance Fed. Here, Jayne is made more approachable for the viewers through his love for his mother, which shows Whedon’s intent that Jayne’s character be appreciated for far more than simply his ability to do the dirty work, and also sets him up for eventual acceptance into the chosen family. While actor

Adam Baldwin's portrayal of Jayne in the condensed "Train Job" pilot paints him as a vulgar bully and a thug, the *intended* two-part pilot, "Serenity" (F1011 and F1012) shows the audience a complex and diverse character with more to offer than muscle (DeCandido 57). Given his rather unflattering introduction in "The Train Job" (F1001), the audience may have mistaken him for a villain the crew needed to overcome, similar to our first impression of Simon in "Serenity" (F1011). This may also have contributed to the generally unfavourable reception he received in the scholarly world. If Fox Broadcasting Company had never requested "The Train Job" (F1001), Jayne might have had an overall better reception, and his betrayal of River and Simon in "Ariel" (F1008) might have been even more impactful.

[6] Regardless, the only person who truly understands the nature of Jayne's character is Mal. He acknowledges that trust cannot be built with Jayne given the circumstances by which Jayne joins the crew. Consequently, Mal refuses to integrate Jayne into the chosen family structure early in the series, which contributes to the events of "Ariel" (F1008). However, as the series progresses and personal relationships develop within the chosen family framework, Mal comes to expect more from Jayne: loyalty to himself and the crew. Jayne's strained relationship with Simon and River is important to the development of his loyalties. As Greene points out, Jayne's rationality and blunt common sense places him at odds with Simon, who is sensitive and caring. The two constantly try to one-up each other, (81) making his problem with effectively demonstrating his loyalty one of the most important factors that prevents him from joining the family.

[7] In her article "Serenity and Bobby McGee: Freedom and the Illusion of Freedom in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*," Mercedes Lackey argues that Jayne is merely a "junkyard dog" who "might have some redeeming qualities...if anyone can ever get real loyalty out of him" (73). It is also evident, however, that Jayne has his own brand of loyalty, which he displays in coming to Kaylee's defense after she is shot by Alliance Agent Dobson in "Serenity" (F1011), despite Jayne's crude jokes about her crush on Simon during dinner. Moreover, when Kaylee is unconscious in the medical facility with her shipmates gathered around her, Jayne secretly observes outside through a grate. He wipes his chin, suggesting that he may even be crying. He is both concerned about Kaylee and respectful of Mal's orders to leave her alone. These early scenes both demonstrate the family-like relationships that hold the crew together—such as Kaylee functioning as the "little sister" of the group—and exhibit Jayne's resistance to openly developing those relationships, reinforcing his sense of self-preservation. Therefore, Jayne *does* care, but he works very hard not to show it. In the beginning of the series, Jayne's emotional intelligence still has much development ahead of it. While Jayne might not be particularly emotionally or conventionally intelligent, in "Serenity" (F1011) he uses his military intelligence to see through Dobson's bluff that the crew faces imminent arrest at the hands of the Alliance (Greene 81). Interestingly, Jayne subsequently turns down Dobson's bribe to turn on River and Simon because "the money wasn't good enough" ("Serenity" F1012). A bribe of enough money with which to buy a ship logically seems as though it should be incentive enough for Jayne to

turn on River and Simon. Moreover, Jayne repeatedly tries to convince Mal that having the siblings on board makes them all vulnerable to capture by the Alliance. Nevertheless, at this point Jayne decides that the bribe will not provide him with a better situation than the one in which he currently finds himself. This choice may be due to his concern for Kaylee, or his loyalty to Mal. It certainly is because he can see himself remaining with the crew for a long time. The latter preference, of course, being without the siblings on board *Serenity*.

[8] Lackey's suggestion that Jayne "refuses to see past the moment, and in the moment, there is always a chance for one big score," does not account for the fact that Jayne betrays River and Simon in "Ariel" (F1008) not just for the money (68). Several motivating factors have been building up in him since the siblings' arrival on Serenity. At this point in the series, Jayne has made it clear that he believes the crew would be safer without the pair on board, a point about which he might be right. River and Simon's presence places Serenity in constant danger of discovery by the Alliance, which is a problem given their profession as fugitive criminals. Jayne and Simon's inability to get along creates shipboard tension, which Mal constantly mediates. Finally, class distinction breeds hostility in both men. Simon's intellect, good manners, and former position of privilege cause Jayne to feel jealous and resentful. Conversely, Jayne's crude attitude and general lack of hygiene disgusts Simon. Jayne feels Simon's disdain, and in turn Simon views Jayne as nothing more than a bully with bad manners. Therefore, by preserving his place on the ship and ridding it of people who he interprets as unwanted and dangerous, Jayne serves his own interests and protects the rest of the crew. We see similar behaviour repeated in "Jaynestown" (F1004), but with a different intention and outcome.

[9] In "Jaynestown" (F1004), we are presented with another side of Jayne. In this episode we see a glimpse of his secret desire to practice a more "heroic" set of morals, which is encouraged by the Mudders of Canton. Jayne feels awkward when he realizes the Mudders have mistaken his past attempt to rob the magistrate for philanthropy when he accidentally dumped the money in order to lighten his ship's load for a quicker getaway. Jayne spends most of his time being ridiculed or fought against, so it comes as no surprise that Jayne is initially reluctant to receive the praise the Mudders give him upon his return to their world. Jayne grapples with the Mudders' love for him because he knows he does not deserve it, which shows potential for moral and emotional growth. Despite his initial discomfort, he eventually comes to like the attention and goes along with it. With the Mudders, Jayne has the opportunity to feel a close bond with other people without the fear of ridicule or the hazard of developing problematic long-term relationships that might interfere with his life goals.

[10] The positive attention Jayne receives from the Mudders starts him down the path to a full lifestyle change. Indeed, "Jaynestown" (F1004) shows that, in his heart, Jayne has the desire to be a hero of the people, but due to life barriers and lack of encouragement resulting in low self-esteem, he has never risen to the challenge. His potential change into a "good guy" is put to the test when Mal tells Jayne their plan to have a "Jayne's Day" celebration to distract the foreman

and workers while Mal and the crew make off with goods stolen from the Mudders. In an unprecedented role reversal, Jayne turns against Mal's plan to steal from the poor. He realizes the Mudders are honest people who like and trust him because he "really made a difference in their lives" "Jaynestown" (F1004), which causes Jayne to re-evaluate the way he sees himself. Jayne identifies with the positive qualities he sees in the Mudders and wants to live up to their positive image of him. As his first act of trying out heroism, Jayne puts himself in harm's way to protect Simon from further injury at the hands of Stitch Hessian, the partner he betrayed in the aforementioned botched heist. If Eric Greene's argument that Jayne cannot understand altruism is true (81) he would have let Simon take the blame and beating, but instead he works to bring the focus of Stitch's anger back to himself. Unfortunately, Jayne does not get the chance to practice heroism a second time that day, as his status among the Mudders is ultimately revealed as a sham.

[11] When Stitch shoots at Jayne a young man dives in front of the bullet, killing himself and saving Jayne. Jayne knows the young man's death was in vain because he is not the hero he has pretended to be. The fact that his public outing does not cause the Mudders to lose their faith in Jayne rattles him, because he does not understand the Mudders' continued belief in him after being shown concrete evidence of his true intentions during his first visit to Canton with Stitch. The shame he feels shatters the heroic image to which he was beginning to aspire, which causes him to regress back into his shell of selfishness, exemplified symbolically when he pushes down the statue of himself. This rise and fall followed by the lesson he learns on Ariel, allow him to rise again more emotionally developed than before.

[12] Mal comforts Jayne on the ship deck after his experience with the Mudders. The tender scene is that of a father consoling his son, and the interaction shows Jayne has learned that self-respect and friendship have value that can be more important than money. Mal also instills a lesson in Jayne that he will come to learn later in the series: if one wants to be a hero, one must earn the title honestly through selflessness and integrity. Unfortunately, the episode reinforces Jayne's aversion to developing personal relationships with others because doing so can make one vulnerable to emotional pain. The events of "Jaynestown" (F1004) directly inform Jayne's personal emotional development over the remainder of the series and film, and are necessary in facilitating his eventual integration into the chosen family of *Serenity*. Before he can be accepted into his chosen family he must overcome the setback in his emotional development, which takes the form of his betrayal of Simon and River.

[13] River's erratic and unpredictable behaviour unsettles and frightens Jayne. He is constantly searching for a way to convince Mal to rid Serenity of their presence. The catalyst for Jayne to formulate and act on a plan occurs in "Ariel" (F1008) when River, seemingly unprovoked, slashes his chest with a knife. At this point the entire crew begins to agree with Jayne's assertions about River as she slides further into insanity, which Jayne interprets as an opportunity to take action. The scene in the infirmary mimics quarreling brothers and the

patriarchal intermediary. In Jayne's eyes, Mal is choosing Simon and River over him, despite the fact that River just viciously attacked him with a knife. Jayne appeals to Mal's patriarchal need to protect the women, arguing "next time little sister gets in a murderin' mood, might be you she comes callin' on. Maybe Kaylee. Or Inara" ("Ariel" F1008). Despite his protestations, Jayne is unable to get his way with Mal and storms out of the infirmary. Mal disciplines Simon but does so quietly and privately, increasing Jayne's hostility toward Simon and Mal's relationship. Mal gives Jayne orders, but reasons with Simon. Jayne recognizes he is being treated differently and views this as unjust, which compels him to contact the Alliance when they decide to go to Ariel.

[14] After Jayne's attempt to sell Simon and River to the Alliance fails, Mal imprisons Jayne in the airlock in order to assess his true motivations and decide whether or not to give him another chance. Under questioning Jayne initially does not understand why Mal is so upset, because "it ain't like [he] sold [Mal] out to the feds" ("Ariel" F1008). Mal finally makes Jayne understand that he cannot pick and choose to whom he shows loyalty on Serenity, which forces Jayne to abandon his self-preserving attitude and accept that being a part of the chosen family is more important to him than money. Mal is an excellent judge of character and can tell that Jayne honestly feels shame and remorse for what he has done, which shows Mal he can finally trust Jayne enough to initiate the process of integrating him into the chosen family structure. From this point on, Jayne proves he is changing for the better by being generous with the crew.

[15] In "War Stories" (F1009), Jayne proves he is emotionally maturing by proving his loyalty to Mal after the events on Ariel. In this episode, Niska returns, capturing and torturing Mal and Wash. Jayne contributes money from his cut of the heist on Ariel to get both men back from Niska. Zoe succeeds in regaining only Wash from Niska's clutches, after which the crew immediately mounts a mission to rescue Mal. Jayne has repeatedly expressed his fear of Niska's torture methods and firmly argues against trying to fight him. He initially refuses to help them, stating that their plan is "suicide" ("War Stories" F1009), but eventually he chooses to join the mission. He even takes a bullet in the process. If Grinnell's aforementioned assertion is correct, then it would make more sense for Jayne to take control of the ship after Wash is returned and leave Mal behind, like he attempted to do in "The Train Job" (F1001). Following this logic, Grinnell's subsequent statement that Jayne's "commitment to behaviors that have good consequences is...accidental and unreliable" is also inaccurate (94). It also does not account for Jayne's moral development, because by this point in the series Jayne is coming to embrace his position as a loyal soldier in Mal's Serenity "platoon," as well as the "son" figure in the chosen family. Jayne cannot be fully accepted until he is redeemed by forgiveness from those he betrayed. Everything must come to light in order to heal and build trust.

[16] Near the end of "Trash" (F1014), Jayne lies helplessly on Simon's table, paralyzed by medication after having been knocked unconscious. Simon has the incentive and ability to do him serious harm or even kill him for betraying him and River on Ariel. Nevertheless, Simon appeals to Jayne's sense of self-preservation by assuring him that he would never harm him, in

part because of the Hippocratic Oath he took when he became a doctor. He also thwarts future betrayals by expressing that going forward he plans to trust Jayne, and hopes Jayne will return the courtesy. After Simon has said his piece, River breaks the tension (in a way) with her nonchalant reminder “plus, I can kill you with my brain” (“Trash” F1014). Jayne’s fear of River takes on a less serious, almost comical tone here, and he will most certainly never cross them again. This development removes all barriers preventing Jayne from becoming part of the family. To further reinforce audience sympathy for and understanding of Jayne’s changing image, the next episode explains his single-minded drive for money in a positive way.

[17] In “The Message” (F1015), our understanding of Jayne’s character develops tremendously. In one of the opening scenes we learn that Jayne has a mother to whom he sends money, and that his mother uses that money to take care of “Matty” who suffers from “Damp-lung” (“The Message” F1015). From the context of the mother’s letter we can infer that Matty is Jayne’s sibling or some other close relative, which offers a new explanation for Jayne’s greediness. Driving the point home that Jayne is a different man than previously thought, in the following scene he assures Book it is okay to pray over Tracey’s body regardless of whatever Tracey’s religious beliefs might have been, because “the Lord should oughta look after the dead” (“The Message” F1015). He even opens up to Book and requests absolution in the event of his own death. While Jayne may have always had religious faith, his open expression of it here shows that he believes in a power greater than himself, as well as the potential consequences of an afterlife. Furthermore, he shows Book his emotional side through discussion of his feelings. Book’s surprised reaction highlights Jayne’s evolution into a more conscientious human being as this is behaviour that was previously out of character for him. The final scene of mourning Tracey shows Jayne with a grim visage, reverently removing his hat. Although Tracey only appears during this episode, his death brings the chosen family closer together through mutual grief. The tragedy they endure cements their bond as a cohesive unit, allowing for the change in the crew’s behaviour toward Jayne in the next episode, “Objects in Space” (F1010) and in the film *Serenity*.

[18] Although Jayne is absent from much of “Objects in Space” (F1010), at the start of the episode the whole crew gets together to discuss River’s behaviour. Not only is Jayne allowed to be part of the conversation, several crew members poke fun at him. This teasing singles him out as the black sheep, but the more humorous tone of the conversation proves he is an accepted member nonetheless.

[19] By *Serenity*, Jayne is fully integrated into the chosen family. His fear of River is replaced by respect for her when she fights at the Maidenhead Pub. With his feud with Simon and River behind him, Jayne joins the crew in a reckless mission through Reaver territory to a planet called Miranda, where they learn that the Reavers were created by the Alliance in a medical experiment gone horribly wrong. Inspired by the knowledge that the Alliance is an evil entity against which they must fight, Jayne states, “Shepherd Book used to tell me, ‘if you can’t do

something smart, do something right”” (*Serenity*). He and the rest of the crew then facilitate Mal’s objective to broadcast the disturbing message about the Alliance’s creation of the Reavers to all the colonized planets. Acting as a family and a platoon, they work together to fight off Alliance operatives—as well as a group of Reavers—in a military-style standoff similar to the Battle of Serenity Valley. In these endeavours there is no monetary reward. The mission has no other purpose than to inform as many worlds as possible that the Alliance is involved in human experimentation and psyche manipulation. Whether a rebellion against the Alliance will be generated from this knowledge or not is irrelevant. Mal and his crew all agree that getting the information out is the right thing to do, for the good of the galaxy at large. By overcoming his “wrong” selfish behaviour and learning the value in “right,” ethically-positive, cooperative behaviour, Jayne has completed his emotional transformation into the family member he always wanted to be.

[20] In the beginning of *Firefly*, Jayne was a rough thug who has a crude sense of humour, an off-putting personality, and an all-consuming greed. He did not understand that becoming a part of Serenity’s crew means becoming a member of a chosen family. The only other example of a crew he serves with is seen in “Out of Gas” (F1005), and he had no love for his former crew members, so there was no precedent set for him when it comes to the Serenity crew’s expectations of his loyalty. By the end of the television series and culminating in *Serenity*, Jayne is a changed man with a strong sense of loyalty. He comes to value the relationships he has developed, and believes in following the family’s rules in order to preserve those relationships. His interactions and struggles with Mal and Simon guide and mold his emotional changes, teaching him that he cannot always get his way by being a bully. By the end of the story, he no longer wants to engage in such behaviour, having risen above it. This change is exemplified in the end of “Objects in Space” (F1010), in which the final scene shows the entire crew relaxing together, as a family. The ship is still peopled with criminals who do not follow the rules laid down by the Alliance. Rather, in some ways they all act like Jayne—they create their rules and act according to their instincts, as well as with compassion and understanding for the diverse set of personalities in Serenity’s chosen family.

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