

**“You Know, You Ain’t Quite Right”:
Humanity and the Monstrous ‘Other’ in Joss Whedon’s *Firefly***

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[1] In the futuristic yet remarkably primitive world of *Firefly*, Joss Whedon places humanity in an expansive universe that spans to the margins of space. In the vast and uncharted emptiness of this realm, Whedon explores the physical and psychological endurance of humanity when removed from the confines of civilization. This detachment from the elements that establish a definition of humanity is unsettling and results in a dissonance that forces the characters to seek their own understanding of what it means to be human. As the crew of *Serenity* traverse through space, they encounter many unsavory characters, but those that induce the most fear are those that exhibit traits that are beyond the scope of the human. These characters, which cannot be identified as human, become the inhuman, the non-human. The non-human takes many forms ranging from the mysterious “other” to the horrific “monster.” Perhaps most terrifying is that which moves within these categories, unable to be identified even in its unknowability.

[2] Delving into the “realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (123), Freud uses the term *uncanny* to explore that which most profoundly unsettles the human psyche. As Freud claims, “the term ‘uncanny’ (*unheimlich*) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open” (132). Gregory Erickson states, “In analyses of monsters as ‘other,’ the focus is on the monster as an unknowable entity; the monster is something outside us, so absolutely other as to be inconceivable. For Freud, however, monsters represent something internal and psychological: a repressed otherness within the self . . . They are the strangers we can never hope to understand, or they are the dark recesses of our souls that we do not want to acknowledge” (“Humanity,” 175). In Joss Whedon’s short-lived yet beloved television series *Firefly*, Whedon explores fear through this scope of the hidden, the secret, and the ultimately indefinable “other” as it is revealed to humanity. In doing so, these “dark recesses” of humanity itself are brought to light, and it is their uncanny familiarity that is most disturbing.

[3] From the moment the crew of *Serenity*, as well as the audience, meet River, she appears otherworldly. Enclosed in a haze of mist, she is vulnerable and mysterious in her sedated state. Her positioning is fetal and passive, and the angle at which we see her is heightened and wide, serving to reduce her further to a submissive and harmless creature. Alyson Buckman acknowledges the intention of this initial viewpoint, stating that this “angle visualizes River as a

vulnerable object” (42). Additionally, Buckman notes that Mal immediately asserts River as an object, accusing Simon of purchasing her. River’s awakening and the subsequent shock she experiences in finding herself on a spaceship surrounded by strangers leaves her hysterical. While this seems like a reasonable reaction, her behaviour immediately upon entering the conscious world situates her outside of the crew. Because of this, as well as Simon’s admission that River is wanted and likely being hunted by the Alliance, River must be hidden away. Her past is a mystery, unknown to the audience and the crew and perhaps River herself. Thus, from the instant River is reborn into the free world of the “black,” she is being identified as “other” due to her alienation from the rest of the crew.

[4] Not only does “Serenity,” the original pilot episode of *Firefly*, present River as a source of mystery, but it also introduces us to the unseen, yet horrific, Reaver. We are meant to fear the Reavers immediately because of the reaction of the crew to their presence. While only their ship is seen in both “Serenity” and “Bushwhacked” (F1003), it is revealed that they were once men, who, because of their isolation on the edge of civilization, have become violently mad. Even when we do finally see the Reavers, they are shown only in frantic bursts of images depicting human-like creatures of no distinguishable gender, race, or any other distinctive physical characteristic. The lack of a clear visual increases the mysteriousness of the Reaver, thus enhancing the sense of danger and chaos they embody.

[5] Ignorance of their origin also increases the fear induced by the Reavers. Simon, being unexposed to the marginal areas of space, is surprised by their existence, knowing them only as the subject of “campfire stories” (“Serenity” F1001). Until now, finding himself “on the raggedy edge” (*Serenity*), the danger of the Reavers was non-existent in his world. It is in these remote spaces, removed from the security of the dominant civilization, here the core planets, that the “other” is forced to dwell. While it can be assumed that the crew of *Serenity* have little exposure to the Reavers, as we are told by Jayne, “Reavers don’t leave no survivors” (“Bushwhacked”), they recognize the threat the Reavers pose. Their behaviour is utterly vile; Zoe explains that if the Reavers succeed in capturing *Serenity*, “they’ll rape us to death, eat our flesh and sew our skins into their clothing” (“Serenity”). Laura Chilcoat argues that this monstrous behaviour classifies the Reavers as “other” and “serves to explain their evilness – they are not human” (2). Their violent behaviour is seemingly motivated only by the sheer pleasure of inducing the suffering of others without moral consequence. It is this behaviour that dehumanizes the once-human Reaver, but, as we often see with Whedon’s work, these categorizations of human behaviour are not so easily defined.

[6] River’s humanity fluctuates throughout the series as inconsistently as her moments of lucidity. Because there are no aliens in the futuristic realm of *Firefly*, a trope found in nearly all popular science fiction to serve as a contrast to humanity, K. Dale Koontz suggests that “Whedon uses River and her fragmented psyche to fill the role of the ‘other’ in the *Firefly*

'verse" (151). She is different from the rest of the crew, outwardly in her behaviour, and, as we learn in the episode "Ariel" (F1009), physically due to the alterations made on her brain, specifically her amygdala, by the Alliance. River's curious behaviour, her fluid and purposefully sensuous movement, and her ambiguous and often incomprehensible communication, serve to alienate her from the crew. Buckman argues that River's "otherness" is due to her distorted perception of reality, stating, "[s]he does not speak in linear fashion; she collapses the boundaries of speech and text, order and chaos, sense and nonsense" (46). Because of her unpredictability and often chaotic outbursts, exemplified in her attack on Jayne in "Ariel," the crew begin to see her as an internal threat. Buckman suggests that River's "attack [on Jayne] is not only a symbolic erasure of those who threaten her (Jayne is wearing his Alliance-associated 'Blue Sun' t-shirt), but is also an indication of her non-linear understanding of reality" (44). River's reality is unique to that of the rest of the crew, resulting in her inability to communicate, both verbally and behaviourally, in a way that they can understand.

[7] While the rest of the crew dwells in the margins of civilization, River struggles with finding herself pushed to the mental margins of consciousness. She is unable to decipher and organize the overwhelming amount of information being processed and impressed upon her mind. In the film *Serenity*, River is triggered by the music and imagery of a "Fruity-Oaty Bar" commercial jingle, the meaning of which seems systematically embedded in her mind, resulting in an outburst of ruthless violence. Upon returning to the ship, River is emotionally traumatized by her inability to control her behaviour and, arguably more horrifically, her inability to filter her own conceived thoughts from those that are somehow imposed upon her. "It isn't mine. The memory," she insists. "I didn't bring it and I shouldn't have to carry it" (*Serenity*). The audience and the crew later learn what this memory is, revealing the true motivation for the Alliance's determination to find River. She is a product of their manipulation and, in their attempt to enhance her mental capacities for their own gain they have stripped her of her original identity, leaving her marked as an unidentifiable "other."

[8] Due to the discomfort felt within our society and that of the *Firefly* 'verse with ambiguity, there is a fear inherently associated with that which we cannot identify. In order to reduce the threat posed by the unknown, we seek to categorize it, for that allows us to attempt to understand it, and often eradicate it. Throughout the series, River has numerous labels imposed upon her, from objectified victim upon her introduction, to a witch ("Safe" F1005), and finally a "reader" ("Objects in Space" F1014). Repeatedly, River is referred to as being some variation of "not quite right" ("Safe"; "Objects in Space"), a term that she begins to use to identify herself. "Objects in Space," she tells Early that he is "not right . . . not righteous," and that like him, she "don't belong, dangerous . . . can't be controlled." Although they do care for her, the crew, especially the men, perceive her as mad, and Simon resorts to the medical label of "paranoid schizophrenia" ("Safe") to account for River's unpredictability. Bradley J. Daniels argues that an alternative diagnosis could be post-traumatic stress disorder, as River is frequently overcome

with reliving past traumatic events, some of which seem to not be experienced directly by her. Both labels identify a mental dysfunction and are often treated in our current medication-obsessed world, as well as the advanced, futuristic world of *Firefly*, with medication. Simon, with his medical background, attempts to stabilize River with what drugs he has on hand. Despite what are surely the best intentions, Simon is resorting to the very practice, certainly on a less invasive scale, which brought about River's issues in the first place. By medicating her, Simon is merely adhering to societal norms, and playing with the chemical construction of the human body in order to induce the appropriate behaviour and thus alleviate any abnormalities and the discomfort associated with them.

[9] River's behaviour could be historically described as "hysterical," the label placed on women who exhibited any form of mental issues. Buckman suggests that this label is somewhat accurate if we take into account Hélène Cixous' depiction of the hysterical woman. Buckman states, "The bodies of hysterical women, Cixous argues, write *l'écriture féminine*, enacting what the conscious mind cannot express" and that "*l'écriture féminine*, or feminine discourse" (45) is essential to understanding River in relation to those that seek to define her based on her powers. River's uncanny ability to sense things beyond the normal scope of perception can be described as the "effects associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish-fulfilment, [and] secret harmful forces" (Freud 154). "I can kill you with my brain," she warns Jayne, and he, as well as the audience, are inclined to believe her ("Trash" F1011).

[10] River's violent behaviour works to align her further with the animalistic Reaver. Her attacks, however, are sporadic yet remarkably precise in comparison to the insatiable and erratic aggression of the Reaver. Her marksmanship and martial art capabilities seem to be the result of rigorous training or physical experimentation, identifying her as a manufactured weapon created by the Alliance, intentionally or not. In "War Stories" (F1010), her abilities are revealed to go beyond what is considered, even by the futuristic standards of the *Firefly* 'verse, to be humanly possible. As the war criminal Niska's men approach her and Kaylee, River accurately shoots all three with her eyes closed, an impossible feat that only increases Kaylee's terror. After opening her eyes, River turns to Kaylee and uncharacteristically boasts, "No power in the 'verse can stop me," repeating Kaylee's joking declaration from an earlier scene. The ease with which River performs this act of violence suggests that she is realizing, or has known all along, what she is capable of, and this shifts the perception of her identity, both for Kaylee and for River herself. For Kaylee, River becomes "not a person" ("Objects in Space"), because her senses surpass the scope of the average human. River, however, seems to relish in harnessing control of her strengths. Michael Marano states that "her actualization as a person occurs as she becomes actualized as weapon" (46) and argues that while her role as weapon seems merely another form of objectification, River's skills are a part of her identity. As her abilities continue to become apparent and she begins to assert dominance over them, River begins to find her place among the crew of *Serenity*, thus deconstructing the mysteriousness that alienates her. After working with

Mal to defeat Early and save the ship in “Objects in Space,” a feat that gains her the trust of her comrades, she plays a simple game of jacks with Kaylee, who playfully calls River a “genius.” A simple joke by the innocent Kaylee suggest the ease with which the crew now engages with River, but it also demonstrates a final attempt to identify River. By referring to River as a “genius,” Kaylee is once more imposing a label on River. Now that they can classify her, she is no longer a mystery to them, and thus need not be feared.

[11] Like River, the dehumanization of the Reavers is based more heavily upon their behaviour rather than physical appearance. They mutilate their faces and bodies, an action that Gareth Hadyk-Delodder and Laura Chilcoat identify as the active “reject[tion of] normative signs of identification” (41). While they choose to manipulate their bodies to appear less human, this only serves to make them appear more like the victims they brutalize than their original human selves. Even their ships are wrecks, moving predatorily through space, their menacing appearance enhanced by red markings, black smoke, and corpses. The Reavers’ distinctive appearance also increases their identification as monstrous and non-human. As Erickson points out, “Reavers’ bodies are recognizably human, yet their deviance is defined by bodily destruction, self-mutilation, rape, and cannibalism” (“Old Heresies” 348). With regard to biological classification, they are inarguably human, yet they lack humanity. In “Bushwhacked,” Mal speculates, “Reavers ain’t men. Or they forgot how to be. Now they’re just nothing. They got out to the edge of the galaxy, to that place of nothing, and that’s what they became.” Their humanity has been revoked, and as Erickson suggests, “Although Mal and his crew think of Reavers as evil, the show also suggests that Reavers were once like us. From this point of view, Jayne’s comment on Reavers, that ‘them people ain’t human,’ is more profound than he could ever know (“Bushwhacked” 1.3)” (348). The Reavers are most certainly monstrous now, yet because they were not always this way, they embody the danger of becoming too isolated, and they evoke the fear of delving irretrievably into the nothingness of space.

[12] The brutality of the Reavers is exhibited most prominently in “Bushwhacked.” The crew, upon investigating a seemingly abandoned ship, finds what remains of a large group of passengers. Mal seems to have a sense of the atrocities that have taken place aboard this ship. Despite Mal’s insight, it is River who first sees the bodies left mutilated and gruesomely suspended from the ceiling. The corpses are hung upside down, seemingly for no other purpose than to distort them and meet those that come across them face-to-face. Because of their awareness of the Reavers’ *modus operandi*, the crew is left horrified, as each of them are aware of what these victims were subjected to before their deaths. Even Jayne, who is surely accustomed to dealing with corpses, firmly states, “I ain’t going over there with them bodies, no ruttin’ way. Not if Reavers messed with them” (“Bushwhacked”). The victims of the Reavers are somehow different to the bodies the crew has previously encountered. They are the embodiment of the fear of the Reavers, and thus they are more than simply a representation of death. As Julia Kristeva asserts in “Approaching Abjection,” “[the corpse] is death infecting life” (4) and serves

to “*show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). These corpses infect the crew with fear, evoking uneasiness with the close proximity, not only physically but also mentally and emotionally, with death. Death becomes that which is uncomfortably familiar, the uncanny, just as the “Reavers are both improbably other and dangerously familiar” in their repressed or destroyed humanity (Erickson, “Humanity,” 175).

[13] While the rest of the crew are preoccupied with thoughts associated with the victims of the Reavers, Jayne cannot help but question the motives of the Reavers for enacting this level of violence on innocent people. As a mercenary, Jayne’s motivation for killing is seemingly black and white and entirely self-serving. He kills someone when told in order to get paid, and he often enjoys it. As he disposes of the body of a Reaver that managed to make it aboard the ship, Jayne muses upon the subject: “Ain’t logical. Cuttin’ on his own face, rapin’ and murdering . . . I mean, I’ll kill a man in a fair fight . . . or if I think he’s gonna start a fair fight, or if he bothers me, or if there’s a woman, or I’m gettin’ paid—mostly only when I’m gettin’ paid. . . . Eating people alive? Where does that get fun?” (*Serenity*). Jayne’s incessant curiosity and deep discomfort with the Reavers is rooted in his own questions regarding his humanity. Jayne’s fear of the Reaver is unique from the rest of the crew, except for Mal, who is perhaps simply more successful at suppressing it, because it is a fear rooted in the uncanny and unconscious familiarity felt when confronted with the Reaver. Freud discusses the uncanny sensations associated with instances when one “sees a manifestation of forces that he did not suspect in a fellow human being, but whose stirrings he can dimly perceive in remote corners of his own personality” (150). 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.

[14] The Reavers are not only physically removed from humanity in their isolation but are also psychologically detached from their original mental state. It is not until the film *Serenity* that the audience, along with our heroes, learns of the true origin of the Reavers. The secret, stored within River, and any evidence left on the planet Miranda at the absolute fringes of space, is brought forth. The holographic confession of Dr. Caron reveals that the Reavers are the result of failed Alliance experimentation. Rather than creating a peaceful race as intended, the Alliance, through undisclosed chemical manipulation of the air supply, succeeded in wiping out the population of an entire planet. Dr. Caron, however, reveals that a small fraction of the population reacted adversely, becoming increasingly violent. In her statement, Dr. Caron is unable to find the words to describe what happened to these people: “Their aggressor response increased . . . beyond madness. They’ve become . . .” (*Serenity*). This knowledge deconstructs the entire definition of the Reavers. Chilcoat argues that this victimization of the Reavers causes them to become “re-humanized . . . [yet their] otherness does not go away” (2). Whedon cannot fully redeem the Reavers, for their behaviour is still abysmal and monstrous, yet with this rejection of a “simple, didactic” portrayal of humanity, as Chilcoat suggests, “[Whedon] works to confuse

boundaries” (2). Wind Goodfriend offers a further explanation of the effect of this manipulation on the Reavers:

It is possible that the Reavers’ transformation happened in part because they couldn’t psychologically handle a plague of these proportions. The Reavers *became* death—their worldview was nothing *but* death, so they embraced that and helped it spread. They slit their tongues and dressed in blood. They wore the skulls of their neighbours . . . Any of us might have done the same. The Reavers were, after all, human. (97)

The Reavers’ secret origin is revealed and that which was monstrous becomes again indefinable.

[15] The knowledge that River and the Reavers share a comparable origin and are connected in their “otherness” is so disturbing that River becomes physically sick. The act of vomiting cleanses the body of that which can harm it, and Kristeva suggests that it is in this moment of purging that “I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit . . . shattering violence of a convulsion that . . . in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects” (3). Immediately after, River calmly repeats, “I’m all right” (*Serenity*), asserting her realization that while her origins are similar to that of the Reavers, she can reject the monstrous and be redeemed. Ed Connor also suggests that this realization allows for a “Freudian release,” arguing that it is “her confrontation with the awful reality of [the source of her madness] that restores her sanity” (190). Although she cannot be controlled, she has attained self-awareness and with that a level of humanity that the Reavers can never possess.

[16] Whedon’s *Firefly* explores the ambiguous definitions of humanity in a setting where humanity is so dispersed that it often cannot be found at all. The fear of losing one’s humanity drives the need for definition of what qualifies a human. Society’s inability to consistently define what a human is leads to a focus on what a human is not. It is because of this definition by negation that, as Erickson states, “monsters [are] crucial in how we define ourselves and our relationship to the ideas of human (“Humanity” 173). Those who cannot fit into the binaries of “human” and “non-human” are defined as “other” and pushed to the margins of society. In the vast nothingness of space, *Serenity* allows this group of individuals who don’t fit in elsewhere to come together and maintain their own understanding of humanity. They delve into the unknown together, seeking to understand it in order to deconstruct their fear of it. As the crew of *Serenity* moves through space and time, they address the evolving relationship to the “other” as presented by River and the Reavers. As a unit, they face their own abjection in this quest:

It is thus not lack of cleanliness of health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order . . . The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior. .

. . Any crime, because it draw attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. (Kristeva 4)

The behaviour of the crew, paralleled by that of the Reavers, is inherently abject because it does not fit in to what is defined by society as “right,” while working to reveal its flawed nature. Faced with this rejection, the crew must join River in her “otherness” and seek to establish a definition of humanity that allows them to keep flying, because, as Mal states in “Serenity,” “It’s enough.”

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