

**She May Cry, But Her Tears Will Dry: *Dr. Horrible*, Toxic Masculinity, and Incel Culture****Malcolm Draven Reynolds**

[1] On the surface, it's easy to enjoy the online/Internet musical creation *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008), written by Joss Whedon, Jed Whedon, Zack Whedon, and Maurissa Tancharoen, as what it is: a fun romp with some famous names, an enjoyable and emotional episodic superhero send-up. It's a masterclass in storytelling for the digital age, a three-part tale that is entirely self-contained. However, much like Joss Whedon's other work, particularly the 2001 episode "Once More, With Feeling" (6.7) from the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), layers can be peeled away to find much darker subjects beneath the surface, and one of those subjects is *Dr. Horrible's* protagonist, Billy, and what his obsession with his "laundromat crush" Penny says about the broader male culture as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

[2] If you remove Billy, a budding supergenius and wannabe supervillain, from the trappings of the "superhero universe"—Joss Whedon's world in which "normal" people exist at the same time as anarchistic supervillains bent on taking over the world and heroes with superpowers, both of which still struggle with "everyday" problems that are often magnified by their superpowered status (much, again, like the world of *Buffy*)—he becomes something even more disturbing: an analog for the real-life indoctrination, often in the darker corners of the Internet, of a subset of angry young men for whom the attention of a woman is considered a right, whose masculinity is tied to others' perceptions of them (and "winning" the girl), and who are with increasing frequency turning to violence in an attempt to "prove" their worth. This too often results in a downward spiral of violence, shocking the world and shattering lives. If one watches *Dr. Horrible* with an eye to this comparison, it becomes suddenly easier to fathom how understanding Whedon's over-the-top representation using this character can aid in the understanding of real-life men like Billy. These men, known as "involuntary celibates" or "incels," are not only too real outside of fiction, but are an increasing danger in a world that allows them online echo chambers to magnify this sense of entitlement and resentment at their perceived lack of feminine company.

[3] When we first meet Billy, he is speaking to us from his "lair"—which, at first glance, looks suspiciously like a basement. The choice to craft this scene as Billy speaking to a camera for his Internet audience allows him to speak to us directly, in a friendly and intimate way that invites us to sympathize with him and to see him as the underdog hero of the piece: unappreciated by his professional peers and struggling to be recognized in his field. He seems like every "wimpy" young man we have seen as a cliché in filmmaking: unassertive, floundering, not traditionally "masculine" in any way—certainly not the muscular, forceful, virile stereotype parodied in Billy's nemesis, Captain Hammer—and he is keenly aware that

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<sup>1</sup> It should also be mentioned that 2008's *Dr. Horrible*, an episodic musical, shares many similarities with Whedon's other famous and much-loved musical work: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* 2001 episode "Once More, With Feeling" (6.7) particularly the much more serious subject matter either implied or directly discussed by the characters under the guise of "look, a happy sing-along!"

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society thinks less of him for it. By being brought into his thought process, we viewers are made to feel bad for him—shown up by his nemesis, the stereotypically masculine and melodramatically heroic Captain Hammer, unable to talk to the girl he likes, and foiled at every attempt at criminality. So we root for Billy, even though he does things that we are taught to believe are immoral as well as illegal—like the theft of gold bars or his attempt at making off with “Wonderflonium” to be used as fuel for his freeze ray—because we believe him when he talks about wanting to make the world a better place.

[4] But as *Dr. Horrible* goes on, these things—Billy’s obsession with the girl he wants, his single-minded insistence that he would show her that he’s the better man if only it weren’t for masculine, good-looking Captain Hammer—can instead be read in a much darker fashion, especially when we move beyond the realm of fiction/fantasy. There is a growing group of real-life young men just like Billy, men who feel as if society and the world at large don’t appreciate them and that they are unfairly refused women’s affections in favor of the traditionally masculine “chad” types—types like Captain Hammer. These “chad” men look and sound like what these young embittered incel men believe to be a woman’s “ideal” masculine type: men who seem to get women’s affections without any effort on their part, simply through existing. They’re good-looking, confident, often athletic—everything that we have been conditioned as a society to think of when we think of the most attractive male stereotypes—and who these embittered young men believe are “taking away” a finite sexual resource. As a result, these young men often end up in online echo chambers that reinforce this anger and amplify it until violence seems like the only solution. These “involuntary celibate” men blame this “status quo” for their insecurities and their lack of female companionship, as well as for their eventual turn toward violence. This makes Billy’s ranting about said status quo, or the unfairness of the world at large, frightening in its familiarity and its justification of violence. In this context, the lyrics from a song like “My Eyes,” which is Billy’s first song after he encounters Captain Hammer (who foils Billy’s Wonderflonium theft and attracts Penny’s attention), with its reference to “putting poison in the water main” may seem funny in the moment but not so amusing in the context of incel culture.

[5] Consider the nature of Billy’s feelings toward Penny, the girl he meets in a completely mundane way (at the laundromat) and on whom he develops a crush. Penny herself is a placeholder, almost. She is played as innocent almost to the point of being naïve—as when the narrative begins to make it clear that Captain Hammer is an awful person who is only interested in her for sex, yet despite these indications regarding his true motives she still acts dreamy over him, or her generic “help the poor” character traits that are meant to show her as a font of compassion and kindness. This doll-like, submissive perfection that Billy sees in her is much like the incel’s idea of the perfect woman: innocent, quiet, not “traditionally attractive” enough to be at risk of attracting the attention of more masculine types (“chads”) than themselves, but kind enough to put up with their own failings and character flaws. And as Billy’s pursuit of her parallels his attempts to be accepted by the Evil League of Evil, Billy begins to show some disturbing traits just under the surface: he is more ruthless, more angry, more determined to “have” her. By the time he’s singing “Brand New Day,” a very dark Soundgarden-esque track loaded with heavy guitars backing up his lyrics about murder and control, Billy has come all the way around from wishing the world were different to thinking that murder is a completely

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acceptable response to Hammer both continually foiling him and taking the “girl of his dreams”—both of which are really the triggers that set him off, much like real-life incels.

[6] Billy’s crush on Penny seems innocent enough in the beginning: there’s a girl he likes, he can’t talk to her. We’ve all been there, right? His conversation with Moist, his sidekick and only visible friend (Billy: “I saw Penny today.” Moist: “You talk to her?” Billy: “So close. Just a few weeks away from a real audible connection”), is played for both laughs and sympathy. Just like he initially seems shocked by the idea of murdering someone to gain the attention of the crime boss Bad Horse and get into the Evil League of Evil, he is disappointed and angry but not surprised that Penny ignores him in favor of Captain Hammer, whose “hair blowing in the breeze,” as Hammer describes his own appeal, is every cliché of handsome/dominant maleness. But the longer that public adulation of Hammer’s “Real Masculinity” goes on, the angrier Billy gets at the “status quo,” even though it is clear that it’s not the underprivileged he’s worried about in that scenario. It’s himself and men like him: men who always claim to be “nice guys” and wonder why women always choose the “jerks” (like his description of Hammer as “Mr. Cool, Mr. Right, Mr. Know-It-All”). These are men who believe, deep down, that they are somehow entitled to the affections of a woman they choose and that if they are rejected, it’s the woman’s fault, and who blame society for allowing such “sexual inequality” to happen.

[7] And when the reality of that perceived inequality is driven home to Billy by Captain Hammer’s actions in a way that cannot be misconstrued—when Hammer makes sure to remind Billy of his superior virility and his dominance over Billy in an alpha-male sense by literally sleeping with “his girl”—violence suddenly becomes acceptable to Billy in a way that he, and our impression of him, based on his actions to this point would never have considered before. And not just violence, but the ultimate act of violence: murder. He doesn’t even justify it with any illusions of societal improvement, not at first: it’s a visceral reaction to being emasculated.

[8] This is how incels, stewing in their sense of deflected entitlement, turn to violence as well. For instance, Elliot Rodger, who killed six people and injured fourteen near the University of Santa Barbara in 2014, left behind a manifesto full of similar reactions: resentment of girls who wouldn’t have sex with him, anger at the men who did have the sex he felt he was denied, hatred for the society he believed allowed this to happen. Before the massacre, he recorded a YouTube video talking about how he had been “forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires, all because girls have never been attracted to me” (*The New York Times*, May 25, 2014). Like Billy, he used the rejection of women to justify lashing out at others and eventually taking lives...and with that in mind, Billy’s video blog takes on a dark similarity with Rodger’s manifesto. Leave it to *Dr. Horrible’s* creators to bring us something as meta as an episodic musical meant to be released entirely online, about...a wannabe supervillain and symbolic incel with an online blog!

[9] Billy even believes that murdering Captain Hammer will prove to Penny that he, Billy, is the stronger male: he wants her to see, as he notes in the song “Brand New Day,” “the evil me/Not a joke, not a dork, not a failure.”<sup>2</sup> He starts believing that if Penny can’t see him as the better person, then she’ll see him as the more powerful one, and thus will be attracted to him

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<sup>2</sup> His use of the word “dork” is significant here because it implies awkwardness, nerdiness, and everything but traditional masculinity.

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once Captain Hammer is out of the way, musing that “she may cry/but her tears will dry/When I hand her the keys to a shiny new Australia.” He has been indoctrinated into the belief that murder still makes him “the nicer guy” in this scenario, that somehow if he kills his rival that Penny will see that it was “for the best” and choose him instead. He has become an incel. Billy’s behavior also eerily foreshadows another entitled young white man from a later Whedon series who sees people not as real people, with whom relationships are formed and maintained, but actual, literal playthings: Topher Brink, the programmer from 2009–2010’s *Dollhouse*.

[10] And at first it seems like Billy is justified in his assessment of Captain Hammer, whose line “we totally had sex” turns Penny into the object to be fought over, and like Billy’s plan is working; here, maybe, she at last will realize that Hammer is awful and Billy is the better choice! However, what Billy sees as his innate “inferiority,” i.e., his final inability to dominate Hammer, causes him to fail at the penultimate moment and lose everything. In what amounts to not a tragic freak accident but the consequence of his own actions, Penny is killed when his attempted freezing of Hammer backfires. Hammer tries to use the ray against Billy, and when it explodes Penny is critically wounded in the crossfire. And for a moment it seems as if Billy knows this and is awakening to the reality of what he has done and why. Realizing that, he argues in the song “Everything You Ever,” “Here lies everything/The world I wanted at my feet” (Let it be said that Neil Patrick Harris’s subsequent delivery—the absolute desolation in his voice rising to combine with a now fatalistic evil—of “My victory’s complete/So hail to the king” is instrumental in expressing the ironic grief that makes this a pure tragedy in the theatrical sense). But like so many of the “incel” young men for whom violence seems like a legitimate reaction to loneliness, he instead swerves all the way into violence with lyrics such as the following: “Now the nightmare’s real/Now Dr. Horrible is here/To make you quake with fear.” This is terribly, eerily reminiscent of Rodger’s final video, in which he told those watching, “You deserve to be annihilated, and I will give that to you” (*The New York Times*, 2014).

[11] In killing Penny and incapacitating Captain Hammer, Billy has achieved the incel’s replacement for love: power. The loss of the one thing that kept him human and grounded—his love for Penny, as one-sided and insecure as it was—is also the thing that has given him the notoriety that he craved...even if now that notoriety is empty and hollow. So what’s left? He is no longer in the basement—he has ascended to the boardroom. He is no longer wearing his old trademark homespun outfit—the Halloween-esque lab-coat-and-goggles setup that he’s been wearing until now. He is garbed in red that is literally the color of blood, black gloves that look like accessories to secret, awful crimes, and his eyes are now not only covered by the goggles, they render him nearly unrecognizable. Now, at the musical’s climax, Billy *is* somebody, somebody to be reckoned with, standing tall in all his Dr. Horrible regalia, and won’t they all be sorry? He’ll “make the whole world kneel”—a very masculine power fantasy—and then *everybody* will know that he won. He’ll have respect and nothing else matters; he’ll be a man in every sense. And even more so than Captain Hammer, who has become an emasculated joke himself—stripped of his powers and crying for his mother after his attempt at using Billy’s freeze ray backfires and turns him powerless. This is every incel’s fantasy: to be seen as the ultimate alpha male, and that word is very important in this context: powerless. Incels seek to make the “chads” and the girls who seek them powerless, and to make themselves powerful,

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believing that that will give them the sexual satisfaction that they feel they are denied. Too often, their way of attempting this power exchange is through violence.

[12] And you'll notice that Billy's agenda of "social change" has been completely abandoned as well. He is no longer justifying his various crimes and schemes by pretending they're about shaking up the status quo or thinking about how unfair the inequality is. Now he's become Dr. Horrible, on par with Bad Horse—who is repeatedly built up through the story as the baddest of the bad—and thus he will be unequivocally evil, no justification required. Now that he feels as if he's lost everything, there's no turning back, so why not simply embrace that evil?

[13] But because this is Joss Whedon, he gives us one final glimpse—as he did in *Buffy*'s "Once More With Feeling" (6.7)—at what might have been. In "Everything You Ever" (a song for which Neil Patrick Harris should have won another award because his words speak victory while the tone and delivery are overflowing with grief), we see the "real" Billy again: the unshaven, unwashed, unremarkable boy grieving alone in his basement. The boy who, having not been consumed with his competition for "his girl," might have avoided all this pain and death. The boy who was the second casualty of Dr. Horrible, right after Penny. The boy who, having nothing left, leans heavily into crime, darkness, and violence. And so *Dr. Horrible* leaves us with that image and the question: could he have been swayed from that course, at any point? In this writer's opinion, that is the true tragedy of this series and a question that it might be vital to consider. How many wannabe Dr. Horribles are even now sitting in their basements, stewing in their resentment and clicking away on the Internet, just waiting for a reason to bring their weapons out in public and finally show all those Captain Hammers?

Maybe more than we think.

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*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. Written by Joss Whedon, Zack Whedon, Maurissa Tancharoen, and Jed Whedon, directed by Joss Whedon. Mutant Enemy, 2008.

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