

“No More Running”:

Firefly, the Western, and the Genre of *Serenity*

According to the show’s creators, *Firefly*’s characters exist “in a whole new universe that did not fall into any kind of science fiction cliché.” Of the many diverse sources of inspiration for *Firefly* and the movie *Serenity*, the most obvious are Western films, which have become increasingly scarce in the last forty-some years. Though it’s set in a futuristic spacecape more familiar in science fiction, the characters and themes of the show draw so heavily from outlaw tales of the American frontier that *Firefly* can rightly be called a Western set in space. When I watched *Serenity* for the first time, though, something jarred, and I hoped it wasn’t just what Joss had done to Wash. After a suitable time of grieving, I realised that there is a generic shift between the themes and techniques of *Firefly* and the resolution of *Serenity*. Whereas *Firefly* is a Western set in space, *Serenity* is more easily classified as a science fiction film with cowboys.

It’s difficult and dangerous to generalise about any show created by Joss Whedon, but the differences between *Firefly* and *Serenity* are evident when we consider, for example, their approaches to civilisation. The occupants of *Serenity* (the ship) occupy an ambiguous moral space between nomads and bandits, adhering (except maybe for Jayne) to a flexible but essential moral code. This is not unusual in Westerns, especially Western romances, in which the hero embodies a higher order of morality and justice, even if he’s condemned or excluded by the majority. The majority in the case of *Firefly* is the “civilised” Alliance and the society of the core worlds. Anything pertaining to the Alliance, even a single ship far out in space, represents “civilisation,” as in the episode

“Bushwhacked.” This civilisation means very different things to different people. Independents like Mal and Zoe want to be left to live their own lives, as messy and chaotic as they may be. River’s teacher at the beginning of *Serenity*, however, teaches that “true civilisation” is a benefit for everyone. Rather than cut-and-dried imperial evil, the Alliance represents overwhelming change, spreading outwards to the most distant planets and moons of the system. Change is a common element to the Western and science fiction, and the ‘Verse of *Firefly* features fantastic developments in space travel and technology as well as changes in the closing of the final frontier.

Despite Mal’s aversion to the sterile and “Star Trekkian” Alliance, in *Firefly* most of civilisation is relatively benign. Alliance officers, though authoritarian and not always trustworthy, are not deliberately malicious. Greater and more immediate danger accompanies the renegades and criminals that Mal’s crew deals with regularly in their efforts to avoid the Alliance. The most obvious exceptions to this are the Blue Hand Men, who are secret agents of the Alliance government. We’re used to things in the Whedonverse(s) being more sinister than they appear, and Joss has hinted that the omnipresent Blue Sun corporation was to play a major role later, but I guess we’ll never know what he meant by that.

In *Serenity* the Alliance is notably more explicitly dangerous. Civilisation seems to *rely* on a somewhat hidden but active military. The Operative, unlike the Blue Hand Men in *Firefly*, works in close cooperation with rank-and-file Alliance officers to wipe out civilians and children in his hunt for River. Mal’s aversion to the Alliance is no longer a matter of preference or personal conviction, like the cowboy who needs wide open spaces or the Confederate soldier who chooses not to live under the rule of his

adversary. The audience recognises that Mal, who almost tearfully declares, “I don’t murder children,” is simply a better human being than his opponent, a personification of dystopian Alliance values and desires.

Even more depraved than the Alliance of *Serenity* are the zombie-like Reavers. In *Firefly*, the Reavers are savages, demented by the void of space, but Shepherd Book maintains that they’re still men. They quite closely approximate the role of savage Indians in many Westerns like John Ford’s *The Searchers*—brutal, sometimes devious, vaguely human but distinctly Other, and able to transform even “civilised” folk into one of their own. It’s not clear where the Reavers came from or what motivates them, but whenever they’re mentioned, everybody tenses right up.

The crew member that reacts most visibly to the Reavers is Jayne, the muscle-bound mercenary. As Joss explains, making the tough guy afraid of something makes that unseen entity very frightening. However, one of the tensions I enjoyed in *Firefly* is that Jayne, the most violent and unrestrained of Mal’s crew, is the most likely to become like a Reaver himself, morally and mentally ungrounded by flying through space with very little to anchor him. He lives through his senses, poking and even sniffing at new objects, and he doesn’t object to Reavers as aberrations against nature or morality, but rather because he doesn’t understand what motivates them: “Eating people alive?” he says early in the movie *Serenity*. “Where does that get fun?”

When Mal suggests using the bodies of the dead from Haven to disguise *Serenity* later in the movie, the crew briefly thinks he might have gone crazy, gotten dangerously close to being a Reaver himself. After the trip to Miranda, though, there is no doubt that neither he, nor Jayne, nor anyone else could become a Reaver so long as human nature is

left to run its course. We learn that the Reavers are very different from what we expected in *Firefly*. When the Reavers come through Mr. Universe's ion cloud straight for the Operative's armada, Joss' commentary still calls them "Indians rid[ing] over the hill and surpris[ing] the cavalry"; however, it's clear that they are, as Joss says a bit later, "human but not human." They are not men turned savage by their unshaped environment, isolation, and the limitations of human nature, but the result of a scientific experiment gone wrong. And though they might originally have come from the human race, they are completely Other from over 99% of us—it's not even clear if the most naturally aggressive people will be the ones "turned"; Kaylee, Inara, or Wash are as likely candidates as Mal, Jayne, or Zoe. The man who got "turned" in "Bushwhacked," after all, is the one hid, though the Reavers' new origin problematizes this whole storyline. [I'd give an official Bryan No-Prize to anyone who can explain how these two stories co-exist without contradicting each other.] Anyway, the Reavers' creation recalls any number of genetic experiment sci-fi stories, and we have entered the territory of science fiction.

The theme of knowledge is another point of divergence between the tv show and the film. In *Firefly*, knowledge is untrustworthy, irrelevant, or withheld. Wash uses "crybabies" to send out false information and escape from the Alliance. Mal respects others' privacy, or at least he doesn't care to pry into their business if it doesn't interfere with his own. In the tv pilot, Mal tells Zoe not to mention the Alliance cruiser to Badger, and he himself doesn't tell the crew that their Alliance salvage is imprinted. And in a memorable interrogation montage in "Bushwhacked," the crew withholds as much information as possible from the Alliance. There are many more examples of these gaps in information.

Plots in *Firefly* are rarely primarily about solving a mystery. Although there's always some sort of missing information that comes to light (usually not through any special effort by the crew), the climaxes of the most stories involve the crew overcoming a physical threat by physically beating it, or at least by pointing a gun at it. This is very close to the action of most Westerns, in which even a search looks for a person or treasure rather than information, and it contrasts to a *Star Trek* plot, for example, in which the crew must understand the nature of their threat, and then they can press a few buttons to make it go away, with tachyon particles or something. Similar plot patterns come up in *Buffy* and *Angel*, using a spell or a certain weapon in place of those few buttons, though an action sequence is usually also involved.

The one exception to this disregard for information in *Firefly* is Simon's quest to find out what the Alliance did to River, and how, and why; but even this is rendered irrelevant in *Serenity*. As soon as the whole 'Verse knows what River knows about Miranda, her mind clears, and Simon can presumably abandon his search for information.

Serenity is concerned with a different set of facts, and it is largely a drama of fact-finding. The crew figures out what "Miranda" means, finds out why it's significant, and then tries to survive long enough to share that knowledge with everyone else. The theme of the transmission of knowledge, rare in a Western but not uncommon in a science fiction plot, relies largely on a belief that everything will be resolved if people are granted more information and are left to make up their own minds. This is an unusual approach from Mal, and it shows more faith in the people on the core worlds than we have come to expect from him. It also requires the unusual and entirely new character of Mr. Universe. There are no traces of the Western among Mr. Universe's ion cloud, tv screens, and

artificial bride. Even his clothes and diction are distinctly twenty-first century [or, at least, twentieth-century; you know, it's a little dated already...].

Mal's confrontation with the Alliance, regardless of its form, is itself a break with his tendencies in *Firefly*. Throughout the series, Mal retreats from a slowly encroaching, ultimately all-encompassing civilisation. The episodic structure of the show follows Mal taking jobs as they come, overcoming challenges like a serial Western. This former soldier is something of a loner, not interested in other people's way of life as long as it doesn't interfere with his own. However, at the opening of *Serenity*, it becomes clear that Mal's cowboy lifestyle and personality are just not tenable; both his ship and his crew, the few things he cares about, are coming apart. Even Kaylee and Zoe are losing hope in him. It's the Operative that convinces Mal that he needs to change his tactics, so Mal turns away from petty battles against individuals to a confrontation with the Alliance's way of life. "No more running," he declares. Mal is no longer in retreat, not even a mere soldier; at the end of *Serenity* he has become an ideologue.

Highlighting these differences between *Firefly* and *Serenity* begs the question, Are the characters' actions in *Serenity*, especially Mal's, inconsistent with the personalities that have been developed in *Firefly*? This is, of course, something that every viewer will have to decide for him- or herself. We wouldn't expect Shane or the Duke to announce an evil farmer's intentions at a town hall meeting and then leave the townsfolk to run him out, but then we wouldn't expect them to ambush crooks in a dress and bonnet, either. I think we've seen enough of Mal to believe that would try to bring information to the rest of the 'Verse through a video e-mail. Personally, I find it stranger

that his doing so seems to defeat the Alliance, which has suddenly become a sort of power block rather than a way of life.

Besides the shifts in the portrayals of civilisation and the Reavers, and the nature of Mal's confrontation with the Alliance, *Serenity* departs from *Firefly* and the Western through its omission of the theme of the frontier and open space. We're all familiar with the cowboy as a wanderer of unclaimed regions, and even people who haven't watched many Western movies can picture the expansive vistas of such a film. Mal's purchase of *Serenity* was motivated by a desire for that kind of freedom, as explained in "Out of Gas," and the same episode shows the danger of such a solitary, liminal lifestyle. The show's theme song highlights the void as a frontier without land or sea, but in the movie the entire solar system seems occupied. Where in *Serenity* are these empty spaces and the freedom that Mal desires? He begins the action approaching a settlement and then hops from one location to the next for the rest of the film. Even Reaver territory seems only a few moments' flight from Mr. Universe's moon.

Although I've provided only a very limited treatment of some of the thematic and technical differences between *Firefly* and *Serenity*, it shows that there are significant breaks between the show and the movie. As I said earlier, it's dangerous to generalise about one or the other: after all, *Firefly* sets up the questions that *Serenity* answers, and had the show been allowed to run I don't know how long it would have continued as an episodic Western, ending each episode approximately as it began. Joss Whedon himself displays some ambiguity—despite his comments about Western elements in the show and film, he flat-out calls *Serenity* a "sci-fi action movie" in the commentary. A mixture of such dissimilar influences, especially over time, is bound to be unstable, and you never

know when Joss' shows are going to suddenly take on aspects of, say, a legal drama (just for example). I'm just glad I can answer people who can ask about my dissatisfaction with the movie without mentioning Wash.