

## UNENDING WAR: COMBAT TRAUMA IN JOSS WHEDON'S *FIREFLY*

ANETA KLISZCZ

independent scholar  
aneta.kliscz@gmail.com  
ORCID 0000-0003-2220-0778

JOANNA KOMOROWSKA

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw  
jk.komorowska@gmail.com  
ORCID 0000-0001-7570-1045

When Dapple runs no more,  
What then can I do?  
Ah, Yu, my Yu,  
What will your fate be?

*Song of Gaixia*, tr. B. Watson<sup>1</sup>

An inherent duality seems to lie at the heart of human nature: in spite of its apparent predisposition toward violence, humankind appears ill-suited to dealing with the actual realities of combat: indeed, both common experience and scientific research indicate that combat experiences count among the most traumatic a human can have. What traumatizes an individual is both fighting and its aftermath, the actual combat and the waiting, defeat and victory. Throughout the twentieth century both mental health researchers and the general populace gained increasing insight into the effects combat or war experience may provoke in the human psyche. Hardly surprisingly, this increased awareness of the problem made its way into the works of popular culture. The most famous (and relatively early) instance of said phenomenon is quite possibly Dorothy L. Sayers' gentleman

---

<sup>1</sup> The poem seems particularly apt in the context, and not only because of its melancholy: it was composed by the Chinese warlord Xiang Yu (sometimes thought to be identifiable with Shan Yu, the mysterious figure invoked in *War Stories* episode of *Firefly* series) as he was trapped by the forces of his arch-enemy and soon to be first emperor of Han dynasty, Liu Bang, in Gaixia (202 BC). Dapple reflects the name of Xiang Yu's horse, Yu refers to his beloved concubine.

sleuth, Lord Peter Whimsey—upon his return from the war, the erstwhile leader of men remains virtually unable to take even the simplest everyday decisions, suffering nightmares years after the conflict.<sup>2</sup> This article considers the presence of combat-related trauma in a popular work openly alluding to the conflict that defined the American state, i.e. the Civil War, namely Joss Whedon's TV series *Firefly*. Though cancelled in the middle of its first season, the series—aired in 2002—rapidly gained cult status.

## METHODOLOGICAL CAVEATS

Before we turn to the actual discussion of the elements of combat psychology or combat trauma present in the series, we need to emphasize some methodological framework of the study. It is based on the 4 disc set DVD release of the *Firefly* series (2004) and is only occasionally supplemented with references to the 2006 movie *Serenity*. Also, no references are made to the related graphic novels or authorial commentary (in accordance with the structuralist methodology). In essence, our purpose was to investigate the psychological effects of war and combat as portrayed in the original series: the authorial (directorial) comments, while indicative of individual intent of the author (director), are of limited help in such an endeavor and would go contrary to the principle of a work's ontological autonomy. Near exclusion of *Serenity* was a correlate of this rigid methodological approach: posterior to the original series, the movie provides a closure to the main story arc, but—somewhat fortunately, given the purpose of the present essay—centers on the Tams' story and the origin of the mysterious Reavers, while offering little insight into the everyday existence of the *Serenity* crew. In a seemingly contradictory step, we have in some cases decided to consider scenes deleted from the original show as they provide some insight into the Unification War (further, be as it may, they were originally included in the series). These scenes, however, are treated as a secondary reference and a mere supplement to the main argument. Yet another caveat concerns the somewhat Whitean aspect of the analysis: neither of us being American,

---

<sup>2</sup> *Whose Body?* was first published in 1923, *Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* in 1928, and *Busman's Honeymoon* in 1937. For an analysis of the shell-shock issue in the novels cf. Lott, M., "Dorothy L. Sayers, the Great War, and the Shell Shock," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Vol. 15(1), 2013.

we are in no position to evaluate the significance of the Civil War context: as a result the study was conducted from a Europe-centric perspective.

## THE WORK IN QUESTION

Joss Whedon's series was certainly not intended as a study on the realities of war, nor the long-term effects of a traumatic experience. Usually described as a space-opera, it is, in its essence, a cross between two inherently "American" genres: science fiction and Western.<sup>3</sup> This is bound to influence the portrayal of the protagonists: neither genre is celebrated for its in-depth portrayal of human psychology. Instead, much like comedy, Westerns rely on "types," while sci-fi tends to focus on technological or progressive concepts, while making frequent forays into dystopic future where human energy is harnessed into technocratic, emotionless pursuit of the alleged and imaginary well-being of a community. The elimination or erasure of emotions, thought to lie at the core of human competitiveness and belligerence, remains a returning theme throughout the sci-fi genre, with the *Fahrenheit 451* movies (1966, 2018 respectively) being possibly the most prominent example of this tendency (2002 *Equilibrium* remains the most patent one). Indeed, the theme made it into Whedon's final chapter of the *Firefly* series, the standalone movie *Serenity* (2005). While Western, despite its political undertones, remains—to a large extent—a primarily entertainment-oriented genre,<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Such a hybrid would of necessity engage both the past and the present, focusing on important social and societal issues of the day much in the manner of post-modern fiction as so comprehensively discussed by McHale, B., *Postmodernist Fiction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1987. Cognate nature of the two genres, one of which (sci-fi) is sometimes perceived as a functional perpetuation or offshoot of the other (cf. Mitchell, L.C., *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996, pp. 21–27, see also Cawelti, J.G., *The Six-Gun Mystique*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Bowling Green, 1984, pp. 11–13, or Slotkin, R., *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, Atheneum, New York, 1992, 635ff.).

<sup>4</sup> For the entertainment value of Western as a genre, see above all Etulain, R.W., "The Historical Development of the Western," in: R.W. Etulain and M.T. Marsden (eds.), *The Popular Western: Essays Toward a Definition*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Bowling Green, 1974, pp.: 718/76 and bibliography quoted.

science fiction is known for its insightful analyses of social and ethical themes related to the rise and advancement of technology. In the case of *Firefly*, this makes for a difficult, yet interesting union, a union which deals—despite appearances—with issues of considerable importance. For now, however, it is important to note two points: the fact that in its basic form neither genre is well-suited to in-depth psychological analyses, and second, that *Firefly* was never intended as a meditation on the human nature/human psychology along the lines of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Irréversible* (2002), or even *Dispara!* (1993). Indeed, the series is top-notch entertainment TV and does not aspire to more than that.

### ALWAYS A SOLDIER

It is not the emotion erasure or the dystopic element that we wish to explore at this point: the focus rests on Whedon's portrayal of combat stress or, where observable, more severe forms of psychological trauma. Let us begin with the main protagonist of the story, Malcolm Reynolds. A veteran of the war which brought about the political domination of the Alliance, sergeant Reynolds found himself on the losing side.<sup>5</sup> This means he is not only a war veteran, a fact which in itself may be conducive to severe psychological trauma: he is a veteran of a war lost, the surviving soldier of an army that is no longer in existence. The Browncoats have lost their fight, their defeat ultimately legitimizing not only the political supremacy of their adversaries but also the supremacy of the Allied discourse; moreover, their defeat also vindicated the Allied claim to civilizational advancement which effectively reduced the enemy (Mal's cause) to uncultured barbarians. Reynolds' terse comments concerning his alleged illiteracy (most succinctly the "yes, I read the poem" remark in *Serenity*, but there are several others in *Shindig*) may thus be viewed as reflecting something more than simple contempt for the beneficiaries of the new, contested order. The thinly veiled venom of respective comments may relate to more complex issues concerning the triumphant discourse but also describe the grim semantic reality of finding oneself among the bested "barbarians."

---

<sup>5</sup> It is important that for Mal it is always the "losing", not the "wrong" side, as witnessed in his conversation with Harken in the *Buckwashed* episode.

As for the war experience directly portrayed in the series, two battles are (briefly) portrayed onscreen, the Serenity Valley (in *Serenity*) and the Du-Khang (in *Message*), while yet another appears in Zoe's reminiscences (New Kashmir in *War Stories*). It is, however, the first of these that comes to the fore in the plot itself: after all, both Mal and his second, Zoe Alleyne (Washburne) have fought in the battle of Serenity Valley.<sup>6</sup> In the Mal-centered story, we see the battle from the Browncoats' perspective: hence, in vivid contravention of the victorious Allied discourse,<sup>7</sup> the battle emerges as a horrifying massacre of the valiant, yet essentially helpless (mostly due to lack of air support) Independent forces and a masterful display of the Alliance's technological superiority (for a European the bloodshed brings to mind the fields of Somme or Sedan).

The superiority of the Alliance is due not only to technological resources but also numbers: it is symptomatic that in the opening scene of *The Train Job* one finds the following exchange between Mal and his erstwhile corporal, Zoe: "M: This is why we lost. Superior numbers. Z: Thanks for the reenactment, Sir." As personal courage and military skills of the losing army are effectively nullified by the sheer force of the Alliance's assault, the losses are so immense and the defeat so grave that some will come to consider it the decisive, final encounter of the war (witness the illustrative remark by Commander Harken in the *Buckwashed* episode: "Some say that after Serenity the brown coats were through. That the war ended in that valley."). A feeling of hope- and helplessness persists even in the more "adventurous" scene of the pilot episode, a scene which was substituted for the original image of the battle's bloody aftermath.

Significantly, Mal names his beloved ship *Serenity* and it is a pity that the final cut disposed of Zoe's highly instructive reflection that "once you've

---

<sup>6</sup> While the name bears an obvious resemblance to the Shenandoah Valley, a locality of immense importance in the U.S. history as the scene of three major Civil War campaigns, the land effectively "put to the torch" by Phillip Sheridan in late 1864, the symbolic importance of the battle appears parallel to that of Gettysburg (1863).

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the importance of perspective in cinematic narrative see in particular Bal, M., *Narratology: Introduction To the Theory of Narrative*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2009.

been in Serenity, you never leave.”<sup>8</sup> Her words bring to the fore a well-known peculiarity of post-traumatic reality of combat-survivors: time and again, they are transported back to their experiences. A seemingly innocent sound (or lack of it<sup>9</sup>), smell, or noise acts as a trigger for the instinctive flight or fight response, an uncontrollable reaction of the limbic system, and is often followed by nightmares or flashbacks, thus forcing an individual to relive the seemingly distant trauma.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Zoe’s deleted line mirrors the title of Col. (Ret.) Charles W. Hoge’s 2010 book *Once a Warrior, Always a Warrior*, both formulas highlighting the permanence of the combat experiences.

The persistence of such traumatic memories is hard to miss as they become attached to seemingly trivial activities. This, quite possibly, is illustrated by the apples story as narrated in *War Stories*. The tale is an account of an actual wartime experience and bears a striking resemblance to many trench stories: two armies trading insults while “enjoying” a brief respite in fighting. One side mentions hunger and deprivation, the other, in what appears to be an act of goodwill, throws in some apples. The fruit, however, are laden with explosives, effectively killing part of the “benefiting” unit. The tale is quite grim in itself, yet the way it is narrated provides an additional frame: as Zoe explains the reasons for her (and Mal’s) habit of cutting apples before eating, she appears totally detached from the narrative (in fact, she continues to calmly slice the apple she is eating). Despite this detachment, she is clearly able to recall the sound of the explosive device activating within the fruit and the horrifying sight that came after the explosion:

Cap said wait, but they were so hungry. (beat) Don’t make much noise. Just little pops and there’s three guys that kind of just end at the ribcage.

---

<sup>8</sup> Harken is also quick to notice the possible implications of the name: “I notice your ship’s called *Serenity*. You were stationed on Hera at the end of the war; Battle of Serenity Valley took place there if I recall.”

<sup>9</sup> Note, for example, the British TV movie *The Wipers Times* (2013); for a reverse image of memories being triggered by a sound, cf. Roman Polanski’s 1994 *Death and the Maiden*.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the issue see e.g. Hoge, C., *Once a Warrior—Always a Warrior: Navigating The Transition From Combat To Home—Including Combat Stress, Ptsd, And Mtbi*, Lyons Press, 2010.

The fact that Mal suspected foul play may suggest some experience with similar (and similarly cruel) military ruses; be as it may, he clearly feels the need for continuous vigilance and alertness. Clearly, such a high level of circumstantial awareness puts immense strain on one's nerves, necessarily affecting their behavior in the future. Both Zoe and Mal continue to cut their fruit in the episode's "present," this particular routine behavior being clearly an act beyond their control—they remain effectively unable to eat an apple (or any other large fruit) in any other manner. Years after the war, they both unconsciously check for hidden explosives.

Also, Reynolds and Alleyn (Washburne) choose to live on the fringe of the vast dominion, refusing to recognize the authority of the Alliance even in the face of defeat of the Independence cause and making their life out of contraband and semi-legal enterprises—this is their informed choice (the others, one learns in the *Out of Gas* episode, are a random assembly of misfits and rejects of the Allied society). Effectively, for the two the war continues beyond the surrender of the "rebel" forces, as witnessed by the pair's implicitly (or sometimes explicitly) hostile behavior toward the Alliance military personnel in the pilot and subsequent episodes. In Mal's case, the hostility appears to run deeper as he is prone to regard anyone connected with the Alliance with suspicion. This deep distrust and contempt influences his relationship with Inara, who has originally sided with the victorious side and continues to be a highly regarded member of the Alliance-governed society. In the *Shindig* episode, Mal's scornful attitude toward the victorious party is possibly at its most visible, positively endangering his life. It also comes to the fore in *The Train Job* as Zoe jokingly remarks: "Funny, sir, how you always seem to find yourself in an Alliance-friendly bar come U-day, looking for a 'quiet drink.'"

Interestingly, Mal's contempt and hostility manifest themselves more prominently in his behavior toward the Alliance civilian upper classes (as direct beneficiaries and architects of the conflict). When confronted by the Alliance military (cf. the *Buckwashed* episode), he appears far more reasonable, or, one may say, far more controlled.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> This control turns quite deadly in the movie: when circumstances make it necessary, Reynolds has no scruples in exploiting Reavers' fury in order to distract the Alliance fleet from attacking *Serenity*. As for Mal's disdain for the ruling classes, one

Mal's occasional belligerence and general lack of concern for the opinion of others are noted by Shepherd Book in the pilot episode: "He's not wildly interested in ingratiating himself with anyone, yet he seems very protective of his crew. It's odd." It is also noticed by the fence Badger, who seeks to justify his backing out of the deal with the *Firefly* crew:

What were you in the war? That big war you failed to win? You were a Sergeant, yeah? Sergeant Malcolm Reynolds... "Balls and Bayonets" brigade. Big, tough veteran. Now you got yourself a ship and you're a Captain. Only I think you're still a Sergeant, see? Still a soldier. A man of honor in a den of thieves. Well this is my gorramn den, and I don't like the way you look down on me. I'm above you! Better than! Businessman, see? Roots in the community. You're just a scavenger.

As he accuses Mal of "thinking he is better than others," he may actually have a point, since the captain does not care for anyone's opinion. He also puts finger on the crucial, defining feature of Mal's life: he is, end of war notwithstanding, still a soldier, still a leader and commander of his men.

The feeling of ill-adjustment is not something known only to Mal and Zoe—it is extremely prominent in Tracey's (false) farewell letter. It may be useful to quote the opening part of the note, because it focuses on experiences which Tracey knows Mal and Zoe will relate to and sympathize with:

I'll spare you the boring details, falling in with untrustworthy folk, making a bunch of bad calls... All that matters is I expect to be shuffled off, and you two are the only people I trust to get me where I'm going. Which is home. I'd like my body to be with my folks on St. Albans. We got the family plot there, and my Mom and Dad, well, they deserve to know I died. You know, it's funny. We went to the war never looking to come back, but it's the real world I couldn't survive. You two carried me through that war. Now I need you to carry me just a little bit further. If you can.

---

may invoke his nasty comments about Simon Tam's privileged upbringing in the pilot episode ("You rich kids, you think your lives are the only thing that matters. What'd you do? Kill your folks for the family fortune?"). There are also some rather unsavory suggestions concerning River's circumstances when Mal discovers her presence on the ship.



The letter stresses the loneliness, home-sickness, regret over chances lost and gone, emphasizing the essential inability to fit in, to function in the new society: “it’s the real world I could not survive.” Tracey fashions himself as a victim of the loss, a man defeated not only by the military superiority of the Alliance but by the very demands of living, a misfit who could not find his niche in the orderly (or disorderly) world. Oddly, as his life ebbs away, he recognizes the truth contained in the words, as he says: “I never could get my life workin’ right. Not once after the war.” The sentiment is one known to many returning warriors and possibly best described for those who experienced the horrors of Vietnam,<sup>12</sup> the ill adjusted war veteran being as a result nearly omnipresent in American movie industry. With past examples including *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *First Blood* (1982), *Suspect* (1987), *Heaven & Earth* (1993), and, to a somewhat lesser degree, *Rules of Engagement* (2000), the figure made its way into Mel Gibson’s 2016 *Hacksaw Ridge*, as exemplified by the protagonist’s father.

## TRUST ISSUE

As duly noted by Hoge and other medical professionals, people subjected to combat trauma often display excessive need for control of their immediate surroundings (and, by extension, of their nearest and dearest):<sup>13</sup> maintaining control over fellow soldiers, surroundings, not to mention equipment is of paramount importance in a war zone, where a life (or lives) are effectively dependent on one’s (or the unit’s) ability and reaction time. In combat, there is no tolerance for error: abandoning the assigned post or straightforward dereliction of duties. More importantly, mutual trust becomes vital: after all, comrades-in-arms rely on one another for their continued survival and it is essential that this trust be cultivated and recognized (a point much emphasized in movies like *Black Hawk Down* or *Act of Valor*).

The *Serenity* crew being frequently viewed as a surrogate family by its members (*Firefly* describing their often difficult bonding), it is hardly surprising that the trust issue emerges most prominently in connection with

---

<sup>12</sup> For a scientific study on the topic, cf. e.g. Shay, J., *Achilles in Vietnam. Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Scribner, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Hoge, op. cit., pp. 54–60.

the Tam siblings story arc. A highly gifted scion of a well-to-do Alliance family, Simon Tam was painfully confronted with the treacherous reality; meanwhile his sister fell victim to deceit and state-sponsored, institutional abuse. It comes as no surprise that both of them remain secretive and withdrawn: what is of far more interest for the present subject is first, Mal's response to River and Simon being abducted in the seventh episode, and then, his reaction to Jayne's disloyal behavior on Ariel. As for that first situation, Mal rushes to the rescue of the siblings (against, one may add, Jayne's quite accurate observation that life might actually be easier without the added complication of sheltering two fugitives<sup>14</sup>). It is interesting to note that the principal reason he gives when asked why he decided to save the duo is their being members of his crew (*Safe*):

S: Captain... why did you come back for us?

M: You're on my crew.

S: Yeah, but you don't even like me. Why'd you come back?

M: You're on my crew. Why we still talking about this?

Mal's concern for the crew and its well-being is also noted by Shepherd Book, who, as noted before, contrasts it with the more cavalier attitude of the captain as displayed toward more "general" public (*Serenity I*). Correspondingly (and very appropriately for a military leader<sup>15</sup>) Mal's principal complaint about the Tams concerns their having endangered the *Firefly* crew ("...in the meantime, you've heaped a world of trouble on me and mine"). In a way, this remark mirrors his reactions to Dobson's incautious threats against the entire crew:

---

<sup>14</sup> Jayne: "That'd be a hell of a lot easier to do without the two most wanted on board. Life would look to be simpler us not carrying fugies." Strikingly, both Zoe and Mal appear to agree with the accuracy of this observation, yet, they choose not to act on its import.

<sup>15</sup> A point duly noted by Harken, the Alliance official: "That's a very loyal crew you have there. But then I can tell by your record you have a tendency to inspire that quality in people... Sergeant."

D: [...] You're carrying a fugitive across interplanetary borders, and you think I actually believe you're bringing medical supplies to Whitefall? As far as I care, everyone on this ship is culpable.

M: Well now. That has an effect on the landscape.

Meanwhile, in *Ariel*, once he realizes Cobb's duplicity in having sold the Tams to the government, the captain confronts his hireling in the ship's hold (or, to be precise, he locks Jayne in the cargo bay with back ramp open while *Serenity* is about to leave the planet). His point: unity and integrity of the crew:

Jayne: [...] Be reasonable. What're you taking this so personal for? It ain't like I ratted you out to the feds.

M: Oh, but you did. You turn on any of my crew, you turn on me. [...] You did it to me, Jayne. And that's a fact.

His behavior, though extreme, may be seen as quite appropriate in the circumstances and morally justified (one may even think that his outrage is highly ethical), after all, he perceives Jayne's behavior in terms of betrayal ("You know, I hear tell they used to keelhaul traitors back in the day"). As the team leader, Mal views himself as ultimately responsible for the safety of his crew—hence, he takes the steps to protect the endangered unity, steps he views indispensable in order to avoid any *Ariel*-like events in the future. Effectively, he views himself as the protector, the person entrusted with the safety of others:<sup>16</sup> hence, he cannot help to conceive Jayne's behavior in terms other than personal betrayal.

The implied emphasis on trust reflects yet another aspect of combat: virtually surrounded by enemy forces (Alliance, potentially deadly clients of Niska's or Patience's ilk), neither Mal nor his allies have time for doubts regarding their own allegiances. Effectively, Jayne's betrayal interferes with one of the best heist plans the crew had come around in some time (a fact duly noticed by Mal, witness his: "Seems to me we had a solid plan. Smooth, you might say"; there is also his humorous yet accurate remark: "The boy's got a decent criminal mind"). The fact is that in order to survive *Serenity*'s crew must remain united—effectively, they need to be a unity, led by one

<sup>16</sup> This is also related to control issues in real life post-war experiences, cf. Hoge, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–60.

man. It is in the pilot episode that Mal rejects Wash's tentative (and largely humorous) suggestion of having a vote, speaking in the tone of seasoned commander: "We don't vote on my ship because my ship is not the rutting town hall."). This, come to think, is a classic combat behavior: battle is not the place nor time for collective decision-making, the well-being and survival of the unit being ultimately dependent on the commander's ability to respond to the changing and hostile environment.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of this trust is well illustrated by the *War Stories* episode: imprisoned and tortured by Niska, Mal places absolute trust in Zoe's actions and choices, harboring no doubts concerning her true intent. Correspondingly, his second is able to act in absolute surety where Mal's belief in her is concerned. This is regarded with some jealousy by Zoe's husband: in *War Stories* Wash makes a telling, if snide, remark:

I love the fact that you two are old army buddies—you have wacky stories that have ribcages in them, but could you have an opinion of your own, please?

Clearly, the bond between the captain and his second is a battle forged closeness of two survivors sharing a highly traumatic, formative experience. Of necessity, such a bond results exclusive of those to whom this particular experience remains foreign (in this particular case, the Serenity Valley, though the two have also fought side by side in the Du-Khang battle).<sup>18</sup>

Thus expressed, the sentiment rings true: in many ways, past sexual closeness is easier to accept and overcome than shared trauma. It seems hardly surprising that the last thing Wash desires when in full possession of his faculties is any further combat bonding. When insisting on coming with Mal to the meeting with Bolles in *War Stories*, he says:

I can't stand the thought of something happening that might cause you two to come back with another thrilling tale of bonding and adventure. I just can't take that right now.

---

<sup>17</sup> One may easily think of Mal's actions during the battle of Serenity Valley, as he has one of his men impersonate the dead lieutenant in order to communicate with the command ("Here, here's your code. You're Lieutenant Baker. Congratulations on your promotion. Now get me some air support!").

<sup>18</sup> As for the recent filmography, the issue comes to the fore e.g. in the British movie *The Railway Man*, manifested in the close relationship between Eric and Finlay.

At the other end of this particular phenomenon, we have Mal's behavior: when facing any potential or actual danger, he instinctively chooses Zoe to stand beside him. This is particularly manifest in the opening episode: when passing in the vicinity of the Reaver vessel, the captain insists on Zoe's presence on the bridge ("Zoe, you come on up to the bridge").<sup>19</sup> Clearly, Mal feels the need to have his wartime aide at his side the moment he faces a potential threat. Echoes of the same implicit trust may be found in the already invoked *War Stories* episode when, by contrast, he concedes Wash's request to participate in the "sale" mission only after Zoe insists on the job holding no actual danger ("It's all right, sir. We've deal with Bolles before. Shouldn't be a problem.").

## IDENTITY COLLAPSED

Apart from *War Stories*, *Buckwashed* stands among the most "psychologically" laden episodes of the series: while exploring what they originally take to be an abandoned vessel, the *Serenity* crew come to realize that first, the ship had in fact been invaded by the cannibalistic Reavers, second, that one of the original travelers has survived (or, to be more precise, lived through) the fatal raid. Moved by an intrinsically human impulse, Mal and others rescue the survivor. An interesting and highly instructive conversation follows:

Book: So he'll live then.

M : Which to my mind is unfortunate.

...

M: Doesn't matter that we took him off that boat, Shepherd, it's the place he's going to live from now on.

Clearly, Mal is drawing on something he has experienced himself, referring the unimaginable horror of Reaver invasion to his own worst experience, to what quite possibly was the defining battle of his life, the *Serenity* Valley, where his platoon died around him, one of the men actually shot down as

---

<sup>19</sup> One may also notice that in the same episode Wash displays somewhat similar trust in Kaylee's mechanical abilities when *Serenity* is pursued by Reavers ("I need Kaylee in the engine room please!").

he stood by his side (cf. *Serenity I*).<sup>20</sup> Consequently, he views the survivor as someone who has just experienced an extremely grim and violent, life-changing event, an event so traumatic that it will shape every minute of his later existence. Yet, even he, scarred as he is by the battlefield experiences, misses the dire truth of the Reaver inflicted trauma—the truth that is incidentally hinted at further in the Shepherd conversation:

M: Jayne's right, Reavers ain't men. Or they forgot how to be. [...] They got out to the edge of the galaxy, to that place of nothing, and that's what they became.

The interesting point is that in spite of his being aware of Reavers' different, non-human nature, Mal persists in referring the survivor's trauma to his own combat experiences—and his war was a war against humans. It is only after hearing that the man had purposefully cut his tongue<sup>21</sup> that the captain realizes that whoever his rescued passenger might have been was forever lost on the raided ship (“Oh, I should have known.”). Significantly, once he comes to that conclusion, he is in no doubt as to the further course of events:

M: You call him a survivor? He's not. A man comes up against that kind of will, the only way to deal with it, I suspect, is to become it. He's following the only course left to him. First, he'll try to make himself look like one. Cut on himself, desecrate his flesh and then, he'll start acting like one.

It is perhaps significant that the “cutting” is portrayed as one of the symptoms of an identity collapse. After all, being associated with

---

<sup>20</sup> According to the research, such an event would provoke a two sided response: on one side, there would be feeling of guilt (the so called “survivor's guilt”), on the other, the feeling of being somewhat “chosen” and thus “untouchable” or “invincible” (for a discussion of the latter that second cf. e.g. Killgore, W.D.S., Cotting, D.I., Thomas, J.L., et al., “Post-combat invincibility: Violent combat experiences are associated with increased risk taking propensity following deployment,” *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, Vol. 42(13), 2008.). Both can manifest itself in voluntary exposition to danger, excessively risky behavior, lack of caution, etc.

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Commander Harken notes that tongue cutting was a method of torture employed during the war, thus widening the possible scope of traumatic dimension of the Unification conflict.

dissociative disorders, self-mutilation remains a highly significant act in trauma-related discussions, particularly those concerning sexual trauma.<sup>22</sup> In his own view, the survivor's mutilation of his body follows the Reaver custom of self-destructiveness: symptomatically for beings totally devoid of the self-preservation instinct, in their particular case "cutting" turns into much more, to the self-destructiveness manifested in their preference for unsafe—nuclearly unsafe—vessels (flying without core containment). Still, one could also argue that the experience of "watching" would of necessity provoke dissociative tendencies, tendencies so frequently connected to self-destructive behavior.

There are other points of interest in the scene: Mal behaves as if the actual course of events were something familiar to him. Yet, while *Firefly* does portray instances of shell-shock (this is the experience of the lieutenant of Mal's unit in the retrospective glimpse of the Du-Khang battle in the *Message* episode,<sup>23</sup> the shock compounded by additional psychosomatic

---

<sup>22</sup> For a general discussion of the subject cf. Simeon, D., Hollander, E. (eds.), *Self-Injurious Behaviors: Assessment and Treatment*, American Psychiatric Publishing, Washington, DC and London, 2001. An additional point of interest—given in the Reavers context—the "cutting" may be (and frequently is) preceded by severe sexual trauma (cf. e.g. the exhaustive discussion in de Zulueta, F., *From Pain to Violence: The Roots of Human Destructiveness*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2006, see also van der Kolk, B.A., Perry, J.C., Herman, J.L., "Childhood origins of self-destructive behavior," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 148(12), 1991; for the repetition issue one may think of van der Kolk, B.A., "The compulsion to repeat the trauma: Reenactment, revictimization, and masochism," *The Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, Vol. 12(2), 1989. For a study of the dissociative aspect cf. e.g. Ogawa, J.R., Sroufe, L.A., Weinfeld, N.S., et al., "Development of the fragmented self: Longitudinal study of dissociative symptomatology in a non clinical sample," *Development and Psychopathology*, Vol. 9(4), 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Symptomatically, Mal takes immediate steps to protect his commanding officer and his record ("Ain't me I'm worried on. Lieutenant ever gets his mind back together, this shouldn't go on his record. Ain't his fault he couldn't take it." Later, under heavy enemy fire: "Zoe! Get the Lieutenant!" (to Tracey, who chooses to protest) "You know the old saying..."). The saying ("When you can't run, you crawl... and when you can't crawl, when you can't do that you find someone to carry you."), referenced also in Tracey's letter, appears in all its entirety at the scene of this latter's death.

complications) and contains several references to acts of unspeakable barbarism, such as the already mentioned apples incident in *War Stories*, nothing in the series suggests that anyone among the crew actually witnessed a Reaver attack (yet, given their behavior in the pilot episode and especially Zoe's manner when talking to Simon, there can be no doubt that they have seen the effects of such an event). The important aspect of the issue is the nearly poetic wording Mal employs to portray the experience in *Buckwashed*:

M: The darkness. Kind of darkness you can't even imagine. Blacker than the space it moves through.

The wording reflects the intrinsic indescribability of trauma, its ultimate uniqueness—like death itself, significantly described by Mal as something one always faces alone (in *Out of Gas*, faced with Inara's pleading, Reynold says: "Everybody dies alone"), the trauma of watching everyone around be raped, dismembered, and slowly tortured to death cannot be shared, communicated, externalized. Because of its immensity, its overwhelmingness, it affects the very core of one's being, and hence, because of its incommunicability, it also forever separates him or her from others, none is capable of understanding the deeply personal experience. There are no words, no available means to communicate and thus impose order on this latter: as a consequence, it is impossible for anyone to share in the horror (after all, the rescued man is alone).<sup>24</sup> In such circumstances, the human mind has no other choice but to turn on itself. In this, Mal is right: the man he rescued is no survivor, for his essence did not, could not, survive the ordeal he had faced. Still, like so many before him, the victim tries to save himself by emulating the stronger, powerful entity: in a classic exchange of roles, he tries to take over as a Reaver. *Serenity's* crew, in fact, are witnesses to the first stage of this change—the disorderly phrases their "survivor" utters, taken to be a description of events, are in all likelihood

---

<sup>24</sup> One may remember that defusing and debriefing, two techniques widely employed to negotiate the traumatic experience, rely on human ability to narrate, and thus externalize, objectify the painful or horrific experience. Cf. e.g. Schauer, M., Neuner, F., Elbert, T., *Narrative Exposure Therapy: A Short Term Intervention for Traumatic Stress Disorders after War, Terror, or Torture*, Hogrefe and Huber, Göttingen, 2005.



an attempt to objectify the victims: “Weak, they were all weak; Cattle. Cattle for the slaughter; No mercy, no resistance; Open up, see what’s inside; No mercy.” This is the Nietzschean abyss at its best (or worst)—in gazing into it (or, indeed, in gazing at it), a person becomes one with this unknown alien emptiness, the experience being so traumatic that their very identity collapses, reduced to nothing, to the mirror of the non-human.

## CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, Joss Whedon’s *Firefly* was not intended as a study in combat psychology. Nevertheless, considerable number of scenes may be taken to reflect a deep awareness of the long-term effects of combat trauma. The exclusiveness of the combat bonding, manifested in the complex dynamics of communication between Mal, Zoe, and Wash, the hardening effect of the experience which becomes evident when you compare the usual behavior of Mal or Zoe and the more carefree attitude of those who did not participate in the war (particularly Kaylee and Simon), the difficulty in readjustment to civilian life (Mal himself, Tracey), and finally the crushing effects of torture—all these are present in the series. In itself, this attests to the pervasiveness of the combat related experience in the American culture, pervasiveness particularly pronounced in the post-Vietnam era. Aimed primarily at entertaining the audience, *Firefly* thus participates in the traumatic experience of the American past, both remote and recent, the loss of innocence that effectively shaped the contemporary American nation. And just to emphasize the underlying grief, there is the theme song, its lyrics once again highlighting the very core of the problem: “Lost my love, lost my land / Lost the last place I could stand / There’s no place I can be / Since I’ve found Serenity.”

## Bibliography

### Books and articles in periodicals

- Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction To the Theory of Narrative*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2009.
- Cawelti, John G., *The Six-Gun Mystique*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Bowling Green, 1984.

- Etulain, Richard W., "The Historical Development of the Western," in: Richard W. Etulain and Michael T. Marsden (eds.), *The Popular Western: Essays Toward a Definition*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Bowling Green, 1974.
- Hoge, Charles, *Once a Warrior—Always a Warrior: Navigating The Transition From Combat To Home—Including Combat Stress, Ptsd, And Mtb*, Lyons Press, 2010.
- Killgore, William D.S., Cotting, Dave I., Thomas, Jeffrey L., et al., "Post-combat invincibility: Violent combat experiences are associated with increased risk taking propensity following deployment," *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, Vol. 42(13), 2008.
- van der Kolk, Bessel A., "The compulsion to repeat the trauma: Reenactment, revictimization, and masochism," *The Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, Vol. 12(2), 1989.
- van der Kolk, Bessel A., Perry, J. Christopher, Herman, Judith Lewis, "Childhood origins of self-destructive behavior," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 148(12), 1991.
- Lott, Monica, "Dorothy L. Sayers, the Great War, and the Shell Shock," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Vol. 15(1), 2013.
- McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1987.
- Mitchell, Lee C., *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996.
- Ogawa, John R., Sroufe, L. Alan, Weinfield, Nancy S., et al., "Development of the fragmented self: Longitudinal study of dissociative symptomatology in a non clinical sample," *Development and Psychopathology*, Vol. 9(4), 1997.
- Schauer, Maggie, Neuner, Frank, Elbert, Thomas, *Narrative Exposure Therapy: A Short Term Intervention for Traumatic Stress Disorders after War, Terror, or Torture*, Hogrefe and Huber, Göttingen, 2005.
- Simeon, Daphne, Hollander, Eric (eds.), *Self-Injurious Behaviors: Assessment and Treatment*, American Psychiatric Publishing, Washington, DC and London, 2001.
- Shay, Jonathan, *Achilles in Vietnam. Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Scribner, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, 1994.
- Slotkin, Richard, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, Atheneum, New York, 1992.
- de Zulueta, Felicity, *From Pain to Violence: The Roots of Human Destructiveness*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2006.

### **Audiovisual materials**

- Act of Valor*, directed by Scott Waugh, Mike McCoy, Bandito Brothers, 2012.
- Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, Omni Zoetrope, 1979.
- Black Hawk Down*, directed by Ridley Scott, Columbia Pictures, Revolution Studios, Jerry Bruckheimer Films, Scott Free Productions, 2001.
- Death and the Maiden*, directed by Roman Polański, Capitol Films and Channel Four Films, 1994.

- Dispara!* (aka *Outrage!*), directed by Carlos Saura, 5 Films S.A, 1993.
- Equilibrium*, directed by Kurt Wimmer, Dimension Films and Blue Tulip Productions, 2002.
- Fahrenheit 451*, directed by Ramin Bahrani, HBO Films and Outlier Society, 2018.
- Fahrenheit 451*, directed by François Truffaut, Anglo Enterprises and Vineyard Film Ltd., 1966.
- Fearless*, directed by Peter Weir, Spring Creek Productions and Warner Bros., 1993.
- Firefly: The Complete Series*, created by Joss Whedon, Mutant Enemy Productions and 20th Century Fox Television, 2004.
- First Blood* (aka *Rambo: First Blood*), directed by Ted Kotcheff, The Wallis Interactive, Carolco Pictures, Anabasis Investments, N.V., 1982.
- Hacksaw Ridge*, directed by Mel Gibson, Summit Entertainment, Cross Creek Pictures, Demarest Films, Argent Pictures, IM Global, AI Film, Vendian Entertainment, Kylin Pictures, Pandemonium Films, Permut Presentations, 2016.
- Heaven & Earth*, directed by Oliver Stone, Le Studio Canal+, Regency Enterprises, Alcor Films, Ixtlan, New Regency Productions, Kitman Ho Productions, Todd-AO, 1993.
- Irréversible*, directed by Gaspar Noé, Les Cinémas de la Zone, StudioCanal, 2002.
- Ordinary People*, directed by Robert Redford, Wildwood Enterprises, Inc, 1980.
- Rules of Engagement*, directed by William Friedkin, Scott Rudin Productions and Seven Arts Pictures, 2000.
- Serenity*, directed by Joss Whedon, Universal Pictures and Barry Mendel Productions, 2005.
- Suspect*, directed by Peter Yates, ML Delphi Premier Productions, 1987.
- The Deer Hunter*, directed by Michael Cimino, EMI Films, 1978.
- The Wipers Time*, directed by Andy De Emmony, European Regional Development Fund, Northern Ireland Screen, Trademark Films, 2013.

## Abstract

The article discusses the long-term effects of combat trauma as portrayed in Joss Whedon's *Firefly* series, focusing on the issues of trust, identity, and belonging. In doing so, it highlights the image of warrior and war in popular culture.

**Keywords:** *Firefly*; combat trauma; adjustment problems; identity collapse

