Running head: Whedon

Joss Whedon

Finding Religious Themes in a Science Fiction Universe

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Abstract

Joss Whedon, the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and other science fiction television shows, is a devout atheist but still manages to weave religious themes throughout his work, including redemption, free will, and Christ figures. This paper will examine the different themes from Whedon's shows and encourage the reader to look beyond the entertainment aspect and into the deeper moral meaning of the situations he creates.

Introduction

Certain television shows today tend to reflect a worldview of atheism, sexual obsession, and immorality often found in American culture. While there are not many shows currently airing that are distinctly Christian, some projects contain moral quality that deserves commendation, especially in the science fiction genre. They contain redemptive themes that challenge the viewer to look more closely at the meaning behind the storyline, including forgiveness, good versus evil, consequences, and positive relationships. Joss Whedon, considered a genius in science fiction film and television, is one of the masterminds behind some of these mind-provoking television shows.

Whedon, a 45-year-old self-proclaimed atheist, created the popular cult classic *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which ran for seven seasons on the WB television channel. This show chronicled the life of Buffy, a normal high school cheerleader who finds out that she is a vampire slayer destined to save the people around her from paranormal creatures and circumstances. While Whedon embraces a humanistic look at life, he tends to weave religious themes into his shows, including *Buffy, Firefly, Dollhouse, Angel,* and *Serenity.*

Many authors, such as John Granger (*Finding God in Harry Potter*), have tried to demonstrate the way secular entertainment can be called "Christian." This is not a stance that this paper will take. The purpose of looking deeper into Whedon's work is to help Christians ponder the thought-provoking messages behind his shows. For example, the following dialogue illustrates the type of worldview that Whedon offers to his observers and critics. Scripts are not written flippantly; every word has weight and meaning behind it. And while a lot of the lines convey a humanistic worldview, religious themes can be

found within that hopeless mindset. The following scene from *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, a musical film that Whedon originally released on the Internet in three acts during the Writer's Guild Association writer's strike in early 2008, illustrates his humanistic outlook:

> PENNY: I've been fired plenty of times.
>
> DR. HORRIBLE: I can't picture anybody firing you.
>
> PENNY: Neither could I! Now I can visualize it pretty well. But you know, everything happens…
>
> DR. HORRIBLE: Don't say "for a reason."
>
> PENNY: No, I'm just saying that … everything happens. (Episode 2)

Not only should Christians examine their entertainment with a biblical mindset, but they should also cultivate the ability to approach secular media with a biblical perspective in order to use it as a witnessing tool. Paul used himself as an example when he encouraged believers to be in the world but not of it in order to reach the world with the Gospel. In 1 Corinthians 9:22, he writes, "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul translated these words into action at Mars Hill in Acts 17:22-34, when he spoke to the Athenians about the idol that had the inscription, "To the Unknown God." He understood that his audience was so superstitious that they would make an idol to a god they were not aware of to avoid making it angry. He referred to what they were familiar with in Acts 17:24: "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life,

breath, and all things." Paul pointed the Athenians to the truth by using terms they would easily understand, such as "temples" and "men's hands."

Paul would not expect modern believers to be easily influenced by everything that they view on television. He is calling them, however, to be critical thinkers. While Whedon's shows do not hold Christian truth in and of themselves, they can be used as springboards to create discussion, just as Paul used the Athenians' idol as a springboard to introduce them to the living God. Christians can make a case for the values that can be found in Whedon's shows by going back to the Bible, pulling out the truth that it holds and using that to lead fellow viewers to faith in the Lord.

Christ has called Christians to be critical thinkers and line up everything that they view with a biblical worldview. That way, if that worldview is challenged, real-world examples can be used to show the practicality of Christianity and how it is implemented in science fiction. Paul also addresses this issue, who encourages believers to always be ready to give a defense for their beliefs. In 1 Peter 3:15, Paul writes, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

Joss Whedon once said, "I'm a very hard-line, angry atheist. Yet I am fascinated by the concept of devotion" (Issbaum). This confession, along with the examples of devotion and other moral themes laced throughout his work, proves that he is searching for something meaningful beyond the atheism that he so firmly clings to. Therefore, it is with a biblical worldview and critical mind that this thesis will delve into the science fiction musings of Joss Whedon.

Background of a Genius

Born on June 23, 1964, Joe Whedon (who would change his name to Joss, which is Chinese for "luck," in 1987) was the youngest of three boys. His family was steeped in the television business, as his grandfather John had been a writer for *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *Room 222*, and *Kilroy*, and his father Tom was an Emmy-winning writer and producer for *Golden Girls*, *Alice*, *Electric Company*, *Captain Kangaroo*, *The Dick Cavett Show*, and *Benson* (Havens 3).

Whedon grew up in Manhattan with his mother, Lee Stearns, who was a teacher, after his parents divorced when he was nine years old. He had a self-described "normal and quite boring childhood," and he was a naturally shy, imaginative, and easily frightened child (Havens 4). He spent many hours alone during his childhood years, making up stories and acting them out with his toys. He enjoyed reading comic books and science fiction novels. Frederick Pohl and Frank Herbert were two of his favorite authors, and he devoured every issue of *Dracula*, *Spiderman* and *Fantastic Four* (Havens 5). Whedon also spent many hours in front of the television as a form of escape. All of these entertainment mediums created a learning environment for Whedon, who commented, "In a lot of ways those worlds made a lot more sense to me than the one I lived in. Every opportunity I had to lose myself in those stories I took and I'm sure they influenced me in some ways I don't even know" (5).

This kind of reclusive behavior is often characteristic of avoidant personality disorder, in which children who suffer at the hands of their parents or are repressed in different ways, resulting in shy or anti-social behavior patterns (Rettew). However, this was not the case with Whedon's relationship with his parents. He always knew that they

loved him, even if he was “a little strange,” he says. “No, they didn’t lock me in closets or beat me. I was just born this way” (Havens 4).

Even as a young boy, Whedon had a penchant for the macabre film genre, especially horror flicks. However, on the opposite end of the spectrum, he also discovered that he had a knack for making people laugh. Whedon noted, “There were times when I didn’t feel as though I was getting the attention I deserved, and I learned that if you said something funny, people would stop and listen. At least for a little while” (Havens 5). He was also a keen observer, studying the people around him and giving him a deeper insight into what made them tick (11).

Whedon always knew that he was a little odd, but this fact was made painfully clear to him when he attended Riverdale High School. He “learned more about rejection than [he] ever cared to” (Havens 10) and transferred to Winchester College, an all-boys boarding school, when his mother was in England on sabbatical. When she returned to the United States, Whedon stayed behind. He had always been fascinated by the British, as he was an avid *Monty Python* fan and “the idea of being British was extremely appealing” (10), but he found that loneliness and alienation haunted him at Winchester just as they had at Riverdale (11). “I don’t think my experience in high school was any worse than anyone else’s, to be honest,” Whedon said. “I just know it was a horrible experience for me” (11).

However, the drama of Whedon’s angst-ridden high school years would set the stage for early plots of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the cult TV show that would ultimately shape his career and reputation as a writer and director. “I was nowhere near close to being a popular kid in high school, I just sort of went and hoped for the best every day,”

Whedon commented. “There were days when I wondered if anyone else in the world knew I existed. You’ll see that plot a lot in the early days of *Buffy*, because that sense of isolation is in almost all of us. Really, there are few people who get away from high school without going through some type of trauma. Most of us deal with it on a daily basis” (Havens 12). Because Whedon based his writing on personal experiences, he was able to connect personally with his viewers and fans.

Whedon attended Wesleyan University after he graduated from high school, where he found he could be more outgoing in his creativity because his opinion was respected. He connected with one particular professor, Dr. Jeanine Basinger, and worked as her teaching assistant during his time at Wesleyan. Whedon still asks Basinger for advice and for her opinion on his work, even though his college years are far behind him (Havens 12).

“Joss … stood out. He’s incredibly smart. He is deeply, widely read. He’s not one of those popular people who falls into show business because he taps the popular culture and nothing else. He has read the classics. He knows history,” Basinger commented. “All of that stuff that you see in ‘Buffy,’ all that greatness, is a product of someone who has had a superior liberal arts education, coupled with a superior mind and imagination” (Havens 14).

Whedon developed his atheistic worldview in his early teens after watching *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and reading Sartre’s *Nausea* (Nussbaum). He is currently very outspoken about his beliefs but does not have a problem with other religions as long as they leave him alone. During a question-and-answer session while promoting the movie *Serenity*, he was asked what he had against Christianity. He responded, “I don’t

actually have anything against anybody, unless their belief precludes everybody else's. I am an atheist and an absurdist and have been for many, many years ... the meaning of life and the meaning of what we do with our lives is something that is extremely important to me … I think faith is an extraordinary thing. I'd like to have some, but I don't and that's just how that works" ("Celebrity Atheist List").

Synopses of Joss Whedon's Works

Before delving into the religious themes of Whedon's works, it is imperative to have an abbreviated background of each of his shows. The following sections will include a brief synopsis of each television show or movie, as well as a short overview of the main characters.

Firefly and *Serenity*

Fox launched *Firefly* in September 2002, but was cancelled after 11 of the 14 episodes were aired. However, it has fostered a strong fan base, enjoying high DVD sales and inspiring fan-powered campaigns to bring it back on the air, although such efforts were never rewarded. On Amazon.com, Firefly received the recognition of being the number one series sold in the science fiction and fantasy television category (Amazon).

The main characters of *Firefly* are diverse in many ways, including places of origin, abilities and trade. Captain Malcom Reynolds, known to his crew and friends as "Mal," is the head of the space vessel Serenity. He is a galactic war veteran who nurses a grudge against the Alliance, the interplanetary government who beat him and the rest of the Browncoat rebels into forced submission. His crew is made up of a variety of characters: Zoe Warren, Mal's first mate and fellow ware veteran; Hoban "Wash" Washburne, Zoe's husband and Serenity's pilot; Jayne Cobb, resident arms and combat

expert; Kaylee Frye, the ship's engineer, Simon Tamm, a doctor who used to work for the Alliance but is currently evading the law with his teenage sister, River; Inara Serra, a professional companion; and Shepard Book, the ship's "man of the cloth" who sees the crew as his religious flock. Together, the crew pick up jobs — legal or otherwise — to pay the bills, all while trying to evade the ever watchful eye of the Alliance.

Serenity, the movie sequel to the television series, was released in 2005. Its main purpose was to wrap up some of the questions that *Firefly* raised before its termination. The plot follows the crew of *Serenity* on yet another adventure but focuses on River Tamm, the telepathic member of the crew with untapped and potentially dangerous abilities, the importance of which will be examined later in this paper.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer and *Angel*

Buffy the Vampire Slayer was launched on March 10, 1997, and ran for seven seasons. *Angel* was launched parallel to *Buffy* in 1999 and ran for five seasons.

At the beginning of almost every episode of *Buffy*, the narrator quotes the mantra of the slayer: "In every generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness. She is the slayer." Buffy Summers is the chosen one, and after relocating to Sunnydale to escape her messy occupational past, she finds herself having to save the world once again. No matter how much she wants to be a "normal girl," she must face her destiny as the world's only bulwark against evil.

Buffy's plot circulates around four main characters. Buffy is Sunnydale's resident vampire slayer; Giles, Buffy's watcher and guide, who harbors a mysterious past; Willow, Buffy's closest girl friend and a technological genius; and Xander, who is

secretly in love with Buffy and will do anything to help her, even if it means being foolish at times.

A mysterious vampire who was cursed with a conscience, ironically named Angel, also joins Buffy. He and Buffy share an attraction for each other, but because of who they are (a slayer and a vampire, respectively), they can never be together. This created the perfect set-up for *Angel*, a spin-off show that focused on Angel and his quest to change his destiny. His goal is singular: to help those who cannot help themselves in order to please the Powers that Be and regain his humanity. To accomplish this, he sets up Angel Investigations, a private detective agency, with the help of actress Cordelia Chase, half-demon Doyle, book-smart British bloke Wesley Wyndam-Price, and Charles Gunn, a street-smart fighter.

Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog

This musical film was originally released on the Internet in three acts during the Writer's Guild Association writer's strike in early 2008. It was released on DVD and iTunes in response to popular demand in December 2008. Sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* actor Neil Patrick Harris plays the title character, an amateur villain who longs to join the Evil League of Evil alongside Bad Horse, the head of the organization. Dr. Horrible keeps a video blog on the Internet of his journey, which is peppered with many obstacles, one of which is Captain Hammer, the local superhero who squashes Dr. Horrible's plans better than he does his own ego. Dr. Horrible falls in love with Penny, a girl he meets at the Laundromat. Her main goal is to bring joy to the world through providing shelter for the homeless, making Dr. Horrible temporarily question his obsession with the Evil League of Evil. However, his love interest is complicated with

Penny and Captain Hammer start dating after he saves her from being crushed by a runaway van.

Dollhouse

The first season of *Dollhouse* launched in February 2009, with a second season slotted for September 2009 with a shortened production list of 13 episodes. The New York Times reported Fox is planning to cancel the show after the finale airs in January 2010. The first season attracted 4.5 million viewers, but the numbers went down to three million during the second season (Wyatt). *Dollhouse* stars *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* alumna Eliza Dushku, who plays Echo, a young woman who volunteers to become an "Active," also known as a "Doll." This status means that she is drained of her free will, original personality, and memories, and is sold to rich clients with fantasies and needs that require fulfilling. Each assignment requires a different "imprint," a personality that is "complete with new skills, intelligence and neurological information" (Press). Echo lives in an underground loft called the Dollhouse with the other Actives, where Topher Brink, the self-proclaimed "science guy" oversees their progress, and Adelle DeWitt, the head of the Dollhouse, deals with clients and any problems that arise. Paul Ballard, an FBI agent who is investigating the Dollhouse, eventually becomes obsessed with uncovering its secrets that he works with the organization and becomes Echo's handler.

Religious Trends in an Ambiguous Whedonverse

The Concept of the Christ Figure

In the first season finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, entitled "Prophecy Girl," Buffy must deal with a prophecy that calls for her death in exchange for the defeat of the Master, a powerful demon bent on taking over the world. In the following scene dialogue,

Buffy, Angel and Giles are in the school library, which serves as research center and training ground for Buffy's slaying skills.

BUFFY: So that's it, huh? I remember the drill. One Slayer dies, the next one's called! Wonder who she is. (to Giles) Will you train her? Or will they send someone else?

GILES: Buffy, I …

BUFFY: They say how he's gonna kill me? Do you think it'll hurt? Tears are flowing freely from her eyes. Angel tries to hug her, but she puts up her hands and quickly steps away.

BUFFY: Don't touch me! (to Giles) Were you even gonna tell me?

GILES: I was hoping I wouldn't have to. That there was some way around it. I …

BUFFY: I've got a way around it. I quit!

ANGEL: It's not that simple …

BUFFY: I'm making it simple! I quit! I resign, I'm fired, you can find someone else to stop the Master from taking over.

GILES: I'm not sure that anyone else can. All the signs indicate …

BUFFY: The signs? (throws a book at him) Read me the signs! (throws another one) Tell me my fortune! You're so useful sitting here with all your books. You're really a lotta help!

GILES: No, I don't suppose I am.

ANGEL: I know this is hard.

BUFFY: What do you know about this? You're never gonna die!

> ANGEL: You think I want anything to happen to you? Do you think I could stand it? We just gotta figure out a way …
>
> BUFFY: I already did. I quit, remember? Pay attention!
>
> GILES: Buffy, if the Master rises …
>
> BUFFY: (yanks cross from neck) I don't care! (calms down) I don't care.
>
> Giles, I'm sixteen years old. I don't wanna die. (Whedon, "Prophecy Girl")

Whedon captures Buffy's anguish over her imminent death in the emotional climax of the first season and introduces a crucial religious theme into the show that had been waiting in the wings for 12 episodes: Buffy as a Christ-figure. Christ-figures occur when "Jesus is not portrayed directly but is represented symbolically or at times allegorically. Christ figures can be identified either by particular actions that link them with Jesus, such as being crucified symbolically … walking on water … or wearing a cross. Indeed, any film that has redemption as a major theme is liable to use some Jesus symbolism in connection with the redemptive hero figure" (Reinhartz 189). Characters who mirror Christ's death in different situations have enthralled, baffled, and intrigued the world and, while they do not accomplish the same goal of saving the world from sin, must still sacrifice their lives for a goal that they deem worthy. In Buffy's case, this goal is purging the world of demons, vampires, and forces of darkness.

Whedon has commented that he is fascinated by the concept of devotion, which according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "the state of being ardently dedicated and loyal." Only one person throughout the course of history has demonstrated the ultimate

act of devotion: Jesus Christ sacrificing his life on the cross to save mankind from the consequences of its sins.

Whedon, whether knowingly or not, created a parallel between Buffy and Jesus' ultimate sacrifice two thousand years ago. The scene in the library, where Buffy wrestles with her rapidly approaching fate, mirrors the struggle Jesus had with his heavenly father in the Garden of Gethsemane.

"Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives … He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.' An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22.39, 41-44). Even though Buffy and Jesus both struggled over their individual fates, they knew that there was no other choice but to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the rest of the world.

When Buffy meets a little boy later in the episode, dubbed "The Anointed One" by the Master, she willingly follows him, crossbow in hand, without protest, into the Hellmouth to confront the Master. Before the Master kills Buffy, he acknowledges her as "the lamb," making a reference to the Old Testament ritual of sacrificing a spotless lamb for the sins of God's chosen people, the Israelites. The prophet Isaiah refers to Jesus as a lamb in the fifty-third chapter of the book of the Bible that shares his name: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isaiah 53.7).

When the Master bites and leaves Buffy for dead face down in a pool of water, Buffy's fate seems to be sealed and hope seems to be lost. However, Angel and Xander find and resuscitate her, which enables her to come back with vengeance and kill the Master, fulfilling the prophecy with her death and saving the world through her resurrection. Similarly, the prophet Isaiah wrote about Jesus' death years before the event occurred: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53.4-5).

In the last few verses of the same chapter, Isaiah prophesies about Jesus' resurrection, in which Jesus fulfills his mission to make salvation available to the rest of mankind: "After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge [God's] righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities" (Isaiah 53.11).

Buffy exemplifies the characteristics necessary to fit the criteria of being a Christ figure. Whedon writes Buffy into a situation where she redeems the world through selfless sacrifice, which has the potential to point to the biblical cross: the ultimate example of redemptive sacrifice.

Free Will and Human Dignity

The first season of Joss Whedon's "Dollhouse," the television series that had a rocky start in early 2009 with only 4.5 million viewers, tackled the issue of free will and human dignity, which can be seen in the following dialogue:

ECHO: You can't program people. We're not computers.

> TOPHER: Humans aren't that different. I just hacked the system. I'm just the science guy!
>
> ECHO: Yeah, looking down from up here on everyone, playing God. You murder people. You gut their bodies and turn them into playthings. (Whedon, "Needs")

In an interview with Joy Press from Salon.com, an arts and entertainment online magazine, Whedon addresses the cutting-edge, borderline offensive take the show has on human dignity. He calls the fictional dealings of The Dollhouse "sketchy and very illegal," with the struggle between good and evil at the crux of the system.

The evil that exists in The Dollhouse is how regular people are turned into Actives: human trafficking. However, the people who get involved with The Dollhouse place themselves there voluntarily, rather than being coerced or kidnapped. Whedon comments in his interview with Press, "…[H]uman trafficking in the real world is beyond heinous. What we were trying to do was create a situation in a science fiction world where people gave themselves up for five years to the idea of, 'I don't care what happens to me. I won't know about it. And as long as I'm not hurt, go with God. It's fine.'" The different spin on human trafficking invites viewers to think "outside the box" and wonder where they would stand on the fictional variation of Actives being taken advantage of by clients if it existed in the real world. With the rapid progression of technology, the human trafficking industry could be a couple technological breakthroughs away from erasing memories, implanting personalities, and making slaves out of people who actually believe they are who they are implanted to be.

The Actives in the Dollhouse cannot be perfectly programmed; there is something in their stripped humanity that desires freedom. Topher, the self-proclaimed "science guy" who oversees the personality implants and mind wipes of each Active, calls this tick "cracks in the system." In episode six, "Needs," the Actives begin to remember their previous lives and try to break out of the Dollhouse. They manage to get out the front door before their minds are completely shut down and re-wiped by Topher. The purpose of the episode is to show how human makeup can trump scientific experimentation, even after being suppressed for a time.

Firefly tackles the same issue of human experimentation with the character of River Tam, a child prodigy. Along with her brother, Simon Tam, River is a fugitive, running from scientists who have experimented on her brain to understand her hyper-intelligence. By far the most mysterious of Firefly's crew, she still suffers from nightmares and "voices" in her head, courtesy of her time at The Academy. Simon's mission never wavers throughout the season: to cure River from the afflictions that were caused by the men who walk "two by two, [with] hands of blue" (Whedon), a phrase she repeats over and over when she is haunted by visions of her time at The Academy. Simon's love and fierce protection for his sister allude to more than a close sibling bond; his hatred for human experimentation is evident whenever he talks about the people who hurt his sister or when he sees patients in other hospitals being treated with less than ethical care.

The other example of human experimentation in *Firefly* is the Reavers. Introduced in the episode "Bushwacked" as humans who have lost all humanity, Reavers live on the fringes of space and live only to feed on other humans. When faced with a possible

Reaver confrontation, Zoe, Serenity's first mate, tells Simon Tam that Reavers will rape, kill, skin, and cannibalize anyone they come into contact with, although not in that order.

This gruesome breed of human had not always been this way. In the follow-up film, *Serenity*, the Reavers' back-story is revealed through a holographic message on the planet Miranda, which had been deserted when Serenity's crew landed. Pax, a chemical agent, had been integrated into Miranda's air processors to calm the population and suppress aggression, with the intent of making the ideally peaceful society. However, as a side effect of the chemical, 99.9 percent of the population became extremely lethargic to the point that they eventually died because they stopped eating and breathing. The remaining one-hundredth of the population experienced the exact opposite reaction, becoming mindlessly violent and aggressive. A chemical that was intended to improve humanity ended up destroying an entire planet and creating monsters.

In every instance of human experimentation in *Firefly*, it has been implicitly frowned upon, and the experiments have ended up going awry. In Joss Whedon's world, experiments make society worse and more painful, not better and beneficial. Science has become controversial with the entrance of genetic mapping, cloning, and stem cell research, just to name a few. In all of this progress, one glaring fact has come out of the woodwork: man has put himself in the place of God. Morals are compromised for the sake of science, and technological progress justifies the means taken to achieve it.

Minette Marrin, a columnist for the British newspaper *The Sunday Times*, addresses the issue of scientists playing God from a positive point of view. "It is surely the point of modern medicine to relieve suffering and restore people to as full a life as possible," she asserts. "Such is the miraculous power of human invention that even

[inherited diseases in embryos are] on the way to being solved ... One way of playing God has now been balanced by another, even more ingenious, human invention. That is the way of science. It mystifies me that so many people oppose it" (n.p.).

Joss Whedon's interpretation of human experimentation in *Dollhouse* and *Firefly* is not the progressive and healthy society that Marrin envisions. In the worlds he has created, humans decompose into cannibalistic Reavers; nightmares, voices and psychological instability haunt children; uncaring machines strip personalities away from people and dub them "dolls," even though something in them longs for free will.

According to the Bible, human dignity is not dictated by science; God designs each human being with a unique purpose. In Psalm 139.13-14 and 16, David writes, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." When experimentation – with the intent of improving society – ruins lives in the process (such as tampering with genes or freezing embryos), it is counterproductive. However, because Whedon chose to highlight this moral dilemma in *Dollhouse* and *Firefly*, it shows his interest in the implications of how morals have consequences, positive and negative.

Redemption

As has been previously noted, Whedon weaves redemptive elements throughout his television shows. Dale Koontz addressed this tendency in his book, *Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon*, saying, "A hallmark of Whedon's work is the notion that a dark, bloody past doesn't condemn a person to wear that coat for the remainder of

existence. Redemption from the past is a theme Whedon constantly threads throughout his work" (126).

Angel, the vampire with a soul who acts as Buffy's love interest and the lead character in the *Buffy* spin-off, *Angel*, is a prime example of redemption. Angel resists his nature as a killer – most of the time successfully – in order to search for redemption for his past actions as an evil vampire. Because his soul comes with a conscience, Angel feels responsible for each human he kills, causing him to abstain from murder altogether. According to a *Slayage* journal article by Stacey Abbott, "Richard Greene and Wayne Yuen further suggest that 'since plenty of persons with souls do harm others, as demonstrated by Warren [a troubled high school student who programs a robot to destroy Buffy] in season six of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, what differentiates Angel from the traditional vampire is that because he has a good soul, he has no desire to harm people'" (par. 2).

The exception to this "good vampire" persona is Angelus, Angel's alter ego that appears when he gives in to his dark side. This danger constantly lurks in the background of Angel's interaction with Buffy, Willow and Xander, even as he chooses love over bloodlust the majority of the time (Abbott). Abbott comments on Angel's complex personality in her *Slayage Online* article:

> While Angel is clearly presented as a hero, a champion, the series takes great pains to present him as a problematic one. … Angel's vampirism is foregrounded in the series, no longer as part of the tragic irony of his love affair with the Slayer or simply in the threat of Angelus' return, for which his colleagues … are always prepared, but through the physical reality of

> his vampirism. The series emphasizes the demands of his vampire body and that he must continually overcome these restrictions and *choose* not to give in to his hungers. (n.p.)

Koontz comments on this paradox of doing the right thing while considering the cost, noting that doubt is a key factor. This problem makes itself known in Angel's psyche more than once throughout *Buffy* and *Angel*, when he wonders whether it is worth fighting his true nature in order to do the right thing. But, whenever he sticks to what he knows is right, the situation he is in reflects his decision favorably. In *Angel*, choosing to follow in the path of Whedon's version of righteousness is a harrowing journey filled with roadblocks, and "[k]ey among these roadblocks is questioning whether the path is the right one in the first place" (127). Producer Kelly Manners notes the overriding theme of redemption is not an easy path and likens it to a recovering alcoholic's condition: Angel is only one metaphorical drink away from going back to his evil roots (Whedon).

The Bible talks about denying oneself in order to be "redeemed," although biblical redemption does not require the completion of good works. In the New Testament book of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matthew 16.24). Paul echoes this charge in the book of Ephesians, saying, "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4.23-24). In biblical terms, Angel makes the choice to forsake the "old man" and put on the "new man," using his new persona to protect people who are in trouble or are hurting. Instead of succumbing to who he is, he aspires to do good instead of evil.

Angel seeks redemption through helping other people. In *Angel*, he teams up with Cordelia, one of Buffy's former classmates who is trying to make it as an actress, and Doyle, a half-demon, to battle corruption on the streets of Los Angeles, California. To accomplish this goal, they open Angel Investigations: a private investigation company that becomes successful thanks to Angel's supernatural powers as a vampire.

Derrial Book is the lone religious character in *Firefly* and is more commonly identified by the religious title "Shepherd." Many faiths are represented in the *Firefly* universe, including Buddhism, Islam and Judaism, but Book falls voluntarily into the Christianity slot. Immediately prior to his arrival on Serenity, Book had been in seclusion at Southdown Abbey, taking a vow of celibacy and focusing on his calling as a Shepherd. Koontz notes, "While initially presented as a gentle, kindly man of God, it quickly becomes apparent that Shepherd Book has a high level of familiarity with worldly, violent things, although he has apparently rejected that life in favor of a contemplative one" (122).

Because *Firefly* lasted only one season, and Book dies a quarter of the way into *Serenity*, his past is never resolved. Even his name is a moral riddle, playing off the adage "Don't judge a book by its cover" and alluding to "the Good Book," a nickname sometimes given to the Bible. Book refers to the Bible often throughout his stay with Serenity's crew and is comfortable applying the content he reads to his life and encouraging his shipmates to do the same (Koontz 122-123).

Whedon could have left Book at the static stage of "preacher man with a past" (124). However, he takes Book one step further and turns him into a walking example of redemption. Instead of being judgmental of Mal and the rest of the crew, "Book proves

himself to be a faithful and nonjudgmental ally of the crew, regardless of their denominations or politics. In this way, Whedon instructs viewers on the nature of redemption" (124).

Christians today should heed Book's example of treating others with respect, regardless of his or their pasts. Some Christians look down on their spiritual brothers and sisters and turn away in disgust when one of them becomes pregnant, cheats on his or her spouse, or embezzles money. The Christian community has done more than its part to stab its members in the back, even though it has been called to take care of its brothers and sisters that fall. The apostle Paul writes: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6.1-2).

Book lets himself become immersed in his faith and does not let his past hinder his ability to move forward, providing an excellent redemptive example because viewers are never quite sure what he is seeking atonement for, Koontz explains (125). Book wants to shed the cloak of his past, which is woven with blood and intrigue, and begins a different life as a Shepherd with the crew of Serenity.

Book's devotion to his faith eventually affects the crew, even Mal, who was averse to any sort of religion on his ship at the beginning. In the movie *Serenity*, Book's fate comes when he stands in the way of the Alliance to protect his friends. But even his death shows his devotion to his faith, inspiring his "flock" on the Firefly-class vessel to fight back against the opposition. His dying plea to Mal is to believe in *something*, advice that Mal takes to heart when he believes that his crew can work together to beat the odds

and win the war against the Alliance. Jayne sums up the impact of Book's influence in *Serenity*: "Shepherd Book used to tell me: if you can't do something smart, do something right." According to Koontz, "That is the essence of redemption – trying to do something right" (127).

Just like Angel, Book tries to attain redemption by changing his lifestyle and doing the right thing. The nature of redemption, Koontz notes, is to move in a new direction while acknowledging forgiveness of the past. But from the Christian perspective, redemption requires much more than good intentions. In the book of John, Jesus tells a woman who was caught in sin, "Go now, and sin no more" (John 8.11). If there is no movement in a new direction, then redemption has not taken place, and that new direction can only be achieved through God's help, because he is the only being who can genuinely change hearts.

Book is afraid that he will fall back into his old nature, which is why he leaves Serenity at the end of *Firefly*. Koontz notes:

> Whedon reinforces his position that there is a continual struggle by light to pierce the darkness. The Shepherd is clearly coded as a man with a dark past who has rejected that past in favor of leading a life marked by compassion and service to others. Just as St. Patrick reformed his life from whatever the particulars of his 'grievous sin' may have been, Shepherd Book tries mightily to be a righteous man … While it is true that our past is a part of who we are; in great part we are who we *think* we are. [He] searches for meaning and faith in his life, and, since he is willing to seek, he often finds. (130)

Conclusion

The religious themes addressed in this paper only scratch the surface of the moral issues that Joss Whedon tackles in his works. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, he portrays Buffy as a Christ figure, whose purpose is to save the world from forces of evil. In *Dollhouse* and *Firefly*, he tackles the joint issues of free will and human dignity, using Echo and River as examples of experimentation gone wrong. In *Angel* and *Firefly*, he paints a picture of two men, Angel and Book, searching for redemption from the dark pasts that haunt them.

Beyond using examples from Whedon's television shows as a springboard to talk about morality and spirituality, Christians should never neglect the primary source of what they believe: the Bible. By staying grounded in the word of God and viewing Whedon's work with a biblical mindset, believers can more accurately obey God's command in 1 Peter 3.15, which says, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear."

Even though Whedon says he is a "hard-line, angry atheist" (Issbaum), his work seems to indicate that he is searching for something to challenge his belief that there is no God. His fascination with devotion, redemption, and free will are played out in his shows, and it only requires a little excavation in order to uncover the deeper meanings that he has buried there for inquisitive minds.

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