People Don’t Like to be Meddled With

_Serenity_ was a film released in 2005 that was a continuation of the short lived television show, _Firefly_. The film took place several months after the final episode of the series and was constructed in such a way that the audience didn’t need to have any prior knowledge of the series to understand what was happening within the film. All the principle cast from the series returned to do the feature length film. The film was able to conclude several story lines from the television series, including the storyline about the character River Tam, a fugitive on the run who had suffered extreme emotional trauma at the hands of the government, The Alliance.

River Tam is one of the two primary characters within the film _Serenity_. River is a young girl, in her mid teens, and the younger sister of Simon Tam. The viewer learns that River is extremely intelligent, loves to dance and has extreme mental gifts. She can read the emotions and thoughts of those around her, which enable her to be extremely observant of her surroundings. She uses her powers of observation and telepathic gifts to predict things that are going to occur in the immediate future, one example being the Reaver attack on the settlement that the crew was conducting a heist on. She is able to warn the crew in enough time that they are able to escape generally unharmed. Her abilities are noticed by the crew and eventually invested upon, earning her the name of a ‘reader.’
She is first introduced to the viewer in a security feed recording, which documented an event that happened several months prior to the main narrative of the film. Through this footage, and various scenes throughout the film, the viewer learns that River Tam had been sent away by her parents to what they believed was a school for gifted children. However, it was actually an alliance-funded facility where the children had experiments conducted upon them. She is shown to be rescued by her older brother, Simon, during the recording, which makes it known to viewers that the two siblings are now on the run from the government.

The main narrative of the story takes place months after this event, and a few months after the end of the series that the film is based upon, *Firefly*. When the viewer sees River again, she is lying on the floor of the ship, staring off into space. As the film progresses, it becomes obvious that River is not a mentally or emotionally stable character. She has regressed to an almost childlike state, insisting upon speaking in riddles the majority of the time. This is most likely directly caused by the extreme emotional trauma she underwent when she was being contained in the alliance facility. The first shot the viewer sees of the character within the film is of her having a needle looking object thrust into her skull, her screaming loudly and strapped into a chair.

When the film was being promoted prior to its theatrical release, various web videos appeared about River Tam’s time in the alliance facility, and are included on the special edition DVD release. These little segments, titled the *R. Tam Sessions*, are not necessary to understand the context of the film, but they show River’s fall from emotional stability, but not in a linear order. The first session shows the viewer of how
River was prior to entering the academy, showing her as an extremely bright, cheery girl who is eager to learn as much as she possibly can.

The next one in linear order takes place once she had been entered into the academy and has begun to have the experiments done upon her. She requests to be transferred out of the academy and return to her old life, then begging to see her brother. The next two shows River the way the viewer is more used to seeing her, speaking in riddles that do not make much sense at first. Finally, the first session to be shown but the last in the linear sequence shows her murdering the man who interviewed her in all the sessions. At the end of the session, she looks directly into the camera and whispers “I can see you,” (River Tam Sessions) an attempt to establish her psychic abilities to the audience.

Her regression to her childlike state, while being because of the experiments, is also possibly because of her psychic abilities. She discovers that the alliance pumped the drug Pax into the air on the settlement of Miranda, which effectively was the reason that the majority of the population dies. The Alliance had thought that the drug would help to prevent aggression in the community, but it instead took away the populations urge to take care of themselves, so the majority of the community eventually starved to death. However, a percentage of the population had a reverse affect, causing them to turn into the rage fueled, cannibals known as Reavers. This information was supposed to be hidden from the ‘Verse, so River discovering it proved to be tricky for the Alliance. During there experiments, they forced her to repress the information, which effectively drove her to regress into her childlike state.
When she begins to piece the information together, her subconscious letting the information come to the surface, she slowly begins to push away her childlike mannerisms. A specific scene that shows this is when the crew lands on Miranda, learning the secret that River has long kept hidden in her own mind through another security feed recording. River reacts to the traumatic and disturbing video, which has a woman explaining just what occurred and then being attacked by Reavers, by vomiting on the floor. Simon, who took up the role of caretaker to River throughout the series and film, rushes to her side to make sure that she is alright. She tells him that she is alright, though he doesn’t look convinced. Then she looks him in the eye and with clear and dictated speech she says “I am alright” (*Serenity*).

She pushes away her childlike rhyming and need for caregiver. She comes out of her regression because her forced repression of information is released. By the end of the film, she seems fully capable of taking care of herself, even taking a position in the crew. She helps Malcolm Reynolds to fly the ship and it is implied that she will be the new pilot of Serenity. Her taking a role in the crew is significant as she is able to show she can take care of herself and function as a stable young adult.

It is also important to look at other consequences from her time in the academy. She was taken into the academy during her early teens, when she could have been in a normal school with children her age. She was denied interaction with her peers for a considerable amount of time, this including boys. Because of this it is unlikely that she was able to develop when it comes to emotional and physical relationships with the opposite sex. It is highly doubtful that Alliance cared whether she learned how to interact
with members of the opposite sex, for they were presumably more interested in her
physic and intellectual abilities.

Also keeping in mind her character’s natural curiosity, it is no surprise that the
film and series hints that she likes to study those around her. Near the beginning of the
film, Malcolm Reynolds is watching a home video taken near the end of Inara Serra’s
stay on the ship. Inara Serra is what is known as a companion, which is similar to a
Geisha or prostitute. In the video, Kaylee Frye states how they have to have records of
Inara, because they had a companion on the ship, who entertained clients on the bed in
one of the ship’s shuttles. When Kaylee mentions how Inara entertained clients, River is
seen in the background of the shot, bending over the bed. Her hair drapes down and she
appears to be sniffing the bed with great curiosity.

The better example that is demonstrated within the film, however, is after the
climax of the film, during the resolution. The crew is working on rebuilding Serenity and
the audience sees Kaylee and Simon kissing, before falling out of the shot, it hinting that
the two have now begun a sexual relationship. The camera pans up to the vents, where
the viewer had previously seen River with a blowtorch. The viewer then sees River peek
her head out of the vents, looking down at the couple. It is implied that she watches the
entire scene, or at least some of it. It is possible that she watches simply out of her own
curiosity to learn about people and how they act in various relationships, or it is possible
that she watches because she could be classified as a voyeur. She is often seen during the
film as watching the other characters, or seeing what they are doing through her psychic
abilities. She is a creature of observation, which most likely stems from her desire to
learn as much as she possibly can. However, River is not the only character within
Serenity that can be studied in a psychoanalytical way, though she is the best one to study. The film's other primary, Malcolm Reynolds, is incredibly interesting when you look at his deep sense of guilt.

Malcolm Reynolds was an active member in the war against the Alliance, having always believed that people should have the right to make their own choices. He believed so strongly in this cause that he volunteered to join the Independents in the fight against the Alliance. Sadly, no matter how hard he believed in his cause, it wasn’t enough to prevent his side from losing. Everything he ever believed in was crushed when the Independents, also known as Browncoats, lost the Unification War.

Malcolm acts generally cold and aggressive in the beginning of the film. His actions could be harbored from his internal guilt about the events in the war. While barely stated in the film, the series Firefly often talked about the Battle of Serenity Valley. The audience learns during episodes of Firefly that Zoe was the only member of Malcolm’s platoon other than himself to survive the battle. Because he was a ranking officer, it is very likely that Malcolm feels guilty for the deaths of the soldiers. He tries to deal with his guilt by naming his ship after the battle, as a way to never forget the events, a constant reminder.

His personal loathing also prevents him from acting upon things that he desires. It is hinted on in various scenes of the film, and many more during the television series, that Malcolm has some sort of emotional feelings for Inara Serra. He immediately rushes to the settlement Inara is on when she invites him, which he instinctively knows is a trap, just so he can save her. Even though he does this act of compassion, the two immediately begin to bicker with one another, something that they are known to do. Later in the film
he lashes out upon her, which is driven from his frustrations at an argument with the crew immediately before and from his aggravations at his attraction to the woman. He states that she fogs things up, meaning she makes things hard to evaluate for him, and how he wished she was somewhere else, though it is only a statement made out of aggravation.

His guilt escalates further when The Operative, a character who is attempting to capture the Tam siblings, murders entire settlements just to send a message to Malcolm. The settlements that are laid to rest are all places that had once sheltered the Serenity crew, people that the crew considered to be friends. This included the settlement of Haven, where Malcolm’s friend, Shepherd Book, resided. He and the crew of Serenity land on the surface shortly after the attack and Malcolm is able to be by Book’s side as he passes away. Malcolm is told that it is his fault this happened, and will continue to happen, because he is harboring River. However, instead of succumbing deeper into his emotional turmoil, he chooses to lash out against it. He chooses instead to honor their memory and travel to Miranda, to find out just what the Alliance is hiding, because the ‘Verse has a right to know.

The end of the film suggests that Malcolm is able to put away some of his inner demons. The funeral could be viewed as symbolic for Malcolm giving up his old self, the one who was cold and aggressive, and instead accepting a new view. During his last scene with Inara, he is able to express at least some emotion that he is glad she hasn’t decided whether to leave Serenity or not. Then the narrative moves to a scene between Malcolm and River, where he is shown to be extremely affectionate to her. Prior to this scene, he is also shown to be caring to his first mate, Zoe.
Zoe Washburne was a soldier during the Unification war and the only member of Malcolm Reynolds’ platoon, other than himself, to survive the battle. After the war, she loyally followed Malcolm and joined the crew of Serenity. It was during the early years on Serenity that she met and married the pilot, Hoban ‘Wash’ Washburne. It is only hinted at during the film, possibly due to time restrictions, but the two characters seem to be completely in love with one another. It is only around Wash that Zoe comes out of her soldier mode and shows affection.

When the ship is flying to the home of Mr. Universe, a man who has the ability to transmit any signal to any screen, they are being pursued by Reavers. They make it onto the settlement with ease, everyone appearing to be alright. But then a harpoon is shot from a Reaver ship through the windshield of Serenity, impaling Wash and killing him instantly. Malcolm and Zoe witness the event and Mal is forced to drag Zoe away from her husband’s body before another harpoon is shot through. The shock of seeing her husband killed forces Zoe to act purely out of rage and aggression. The crew is meant to stay behind, while Malcolm goes to transmit the video recording from Miranda, and fight the oncoming Reavers. She uses her aggression as fuel in the battle and is one of the crew members to be an effective warrior during the scene. It is implied that she no longer cares if she lives or dies because she has nothing to live for.

Zoe is able to overcome her aggression and rage, after River defeats the Reavers and the crew is no longer in danger. It isn’t shown during the film, but it is likely that following the battle she is able to go through the stages of grief. Following the climax of the film, she shares a scene with Malcolm Reynolds, where she indirectly says that she is dealing but will be fine with time.
Through *Serenity*, Joss Whedon is able to exemplify various types of psychological characteristics. Whether it is the aspects of repression and regression in the emotionally traumatized River Tam or Malcolm Reynolds with his complete sense of personal guilt, each character comes to life and can be considered identifiable in some way.
Works Cited

