

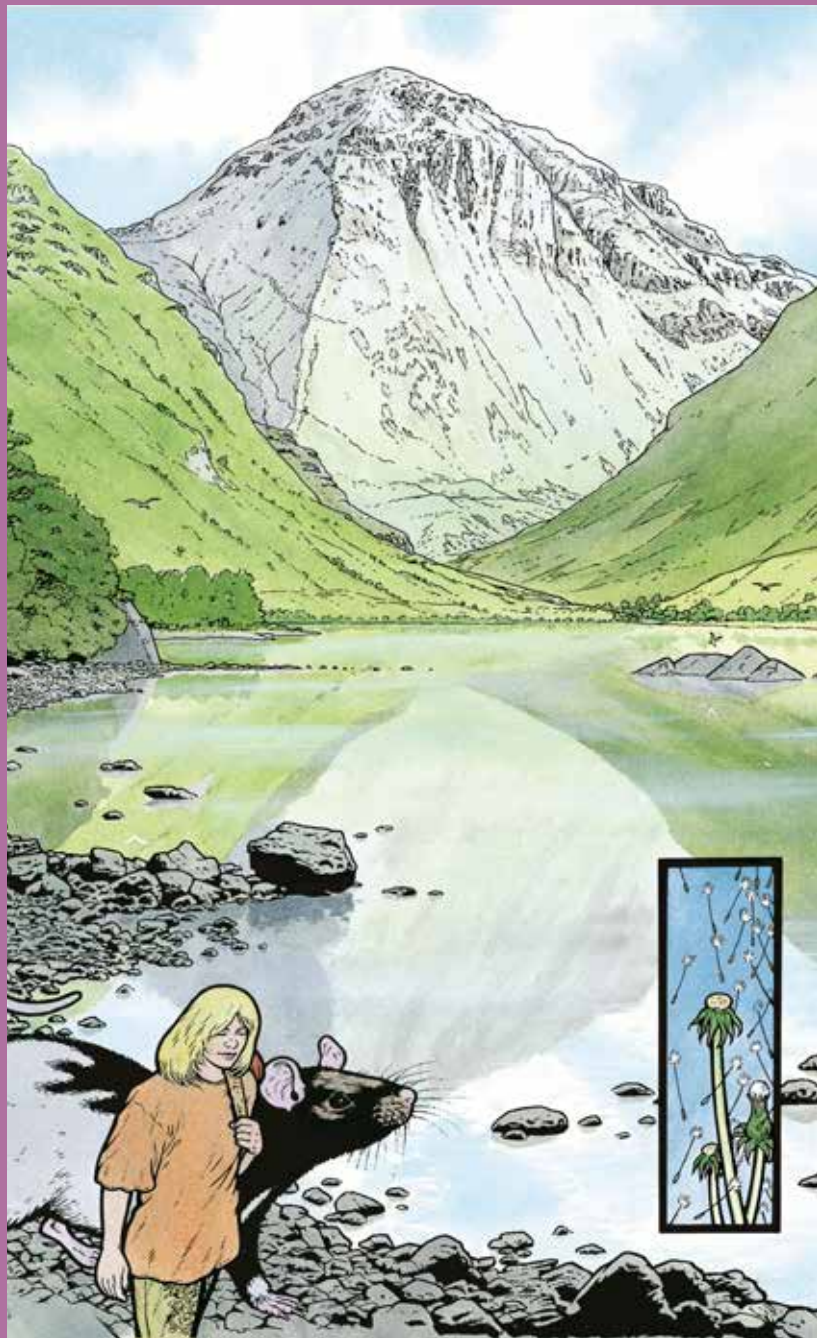
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Send letters, comments and submissions (including artwork, images etc) to: editors@asylumonline.net

Send creative writing and poetry submissions to: william.park@talk21.com

Co-editors in the Mental Health in Comics series
Meg John Barker, Joseph de Lappe and Caroline Walters

Executive Editor
Phil Virden: tigerpapers@btinternet.com

General Editor
Lin Bigwood

Business Manager
Peter Bullimore

Members of the Asylum Collective

Jill Anderson	Jim Campbell
David Harper	Tamasin Knight
China Mills	William Park
Ian Parker	Dina Poursanidou
Sonia Soans	Helen Spandler
Pauline Whelan	Lauren Wroe

Design
Raven Books

Administration & Distribution
PCCS Books, Wyastone Business Park
Wyastone Leys, Monmouth. NP25 3SR

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Asylum magazine is a forum for free debate, open to anyone with an interest in psychiatry or mental health. We especially welcome contributions from service users or ex-users (or survivors), carers, and frontline psychiatric or mental health workers (anonymously, if you wish). The magazine is not-for-profit and run by a collective of unpaid volunteers. Asylum Collective is open to anyone who wants to help produce and develop the magazine, working in a spirit of equality. Please contact us if you want to help.

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MADNESS IN THE WHEDONVERSE

How mental illness is portrayed in the works of Joss Whedon

by Jemma Tosh
jemma.tosh@gmail.com



I love *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*). As explained by Joss Whedon, the concept was deliberately conceived as a feminist reworking of horror films in which 'bubble-headed blondes wandered into dark alleys and got murdered by some creature'.

I'm not saying it is perfect, but I found it helpful to grow up alongside a cast of people who were socially excluded and felt like the weight of the world was on their shoulders. As a feminist, the show and the comics provided many examples of femininity and strength that had been lacking for sometime in media representations, as well as dealing with topics related to sexuality, sexual violence and domestic abuse. It continues to do so, with Season Eight and onwards being released solely as graphic novels.

Being a fan of Joss Whedon, and also a critical psychologist, I couldn't help but notice the frequent depiction of 'mental illness' in his work, and I have been keen to examine its intersections with gender for some time. Joss' work doesn't always match my own stance on feminism (how could it when feminism is so vast and diverse?), and there is much debate over the feminist content of his productions and speeches. As Bacon-Smith says, '...Whedon has layered and crossed meanings, deliberately constructing in design, by design, more questions than his narrative answers'. Nevertheless, I am curious to know if his critical perspective seeps into other areas of oppression, like sanism.

The 'Whedonverse' contains a wide range of characters from television series that became graphic novels, to graphic novels that became films. In relation to feminine characters that depict 'mental illness' in some way, notable is River Tam from the television series, film, and graphic novels connected to *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Also, in a powerful episode from *BtVS* (Season 6, episode 17: *Normal Again*), Buffy temporarily views her entire life as a hallucination, with an aim to return to 'normality', where vampires are a 'delusion'¹.

River Tam

River is introduced as an unexplained phenomenon. Her statements are contrasted with other characters: they appear irrational and nonsensical. She is also shown to be gifted, a talented dancer, well educated, and a 'weapon'. In the media, connections between mental illness and danger are well documented and extremely problematic. However, Whedon's portrayal is anything but the narrative we are used to. River's nonsensical statements are revealed as highly informed, and only appear nonsensical because she had more information than the rest of the group.

For example, in the film *Serenity*, River is reminded of a memory she acquired through her psychic ability and her presence in a government testing facility:

Simon: Show us what? Who is Miranda? Am I ...
talking to Miranda now?

She shoots him a look.

River: I'm not a multiple, dumblo.
(Whedon, 2004, para. 56)

River: (*pointing to screen*) Miranda.
It's a planet. Matches the one from her dream
INT. BRIDGE – LATER

Everyone has gathered. Wash is piloting now, as they are in atmosphere. River is by Simon. She moves restlessly, upset.

Kaylee: How can it be there's a whole planet called
Miranda and none of us knowed that?
(Whedon, 2004, para. 80)

The memory related to deaths of occupants of the planet Miranda, that the group go on to uncover, is the beginning of a huge government secret. Therefore, rather

than depicting her as ‘mentally ill’, River was framed as being misunderstood by a world that failed to keep up with her superior intelligence and gifts (including her psychic abilities). This is a similar narrative to that of Drusilla, who is introduced as a ‘mad’ vampire with psychic abilities (in *BtVS*, *Angel*² and *Spike*).

River’s violence begins as an unpredictable threat, but is carefully outlined as a consequence of government funded experimental testing. She is also repeatedly positioned as dangerous to the government, due to her having access to information that they are trying to keep hidden. The rest of the group initially viewed her as a danger as well:

The Operative: I think you’re beginning to understand how dangerous River Tam is.

Mal: She is a mite unpredictable. Mood swings, of a sort.

The Operative: It’s worse than you know.

Mal: It usually is.

The Operative: That girl will rain destruction down on you and your ship. She’s an albatross, Captain.

(Whedon, 2004, para. 67)

When her violence is brought out by a subliminal message that triggers her behavioural conditioning, it is one of the few times that her behaviour is unpredictable, dangerous and chaotic. Subsequently, her violence is shown to be strength that is used in self-defence, or in protecting others. At the end of the film, her brother Simon has been hurt and the group appear to be in a no-win situation:

Simon: I hate to ... leave ...

River: You won’t. You take care of me, Simon. You’ve always taken care of me.

She stands as the emergency lights come on, giving her face an unearthly glow as she looks down at him.

River (*continuing*): My turn.

(Whedon, 2004, para. 115)

River’s ‘my turn’ precedes her most heroic moment, where she kills enemies despite being vastly outnumbered. Her heroism and purposeful (rather than irrational) aggression only become apparent once she has escaped government containment and the remaining cast have caught up with her knowledge. Therefore, one overarching reading regarding mental illness in the *Serenity* world is this: mental distress is a consequence of social context and abuse, and it is up to those who do not understand, to learn. In relation to dangerousness, the story isn’t one of ‘mad’ violence, but of exceptional individuals being a danger to abusive regimes.

Buffy Summers

In an episode that stands out from other themes in the Buffy world, *Normal Again* began with Buffy being injected during a fight with a demon. This non-consensual intake of chemicals resulted in hallucinations and her questioning reality. Buffy’s life became split between a world with friends, loss, pain, and an ongoing fight against evil and a world where loved ones were returned to her and the fight was over, and she was safe. Buffy’s longing for safety, love and an escape from pain led her to very nearly choose the ‘reality’ of psychiatry. While ultimately she chose to stay with her friends and ‘fight the good fight’, the episode ends with an image of her alone in a padded cell, wearing a straight jacket.

This episode destabilises the reality that viewers have become accustomed to over six years:

Buffy: It stung me or something, and ... then I was like ... no. It, it wasn’t “like”. I *was* in an institution. There were, um ... doctors and ... nurses and, and other patients. They, they told me that I was sick. I guess crazy. And that, um, Sunnydale and, and all of this, it ... none of it ... was real.

Xander: Oh, come on, that’s ridiculous! What? You think this isn’t real just because of all the vampires and demons and ex-vengeance demons and the sister that used to be a big ball of universe-destroying energy? (*pauses, frowns*)

Buffy: I know how this must sound, but ... it felt so real.

(Gutierrez, 2002, Act II)

Like Geller says, ‘As viewers, we’re in the same boat as Buffy; our vantage point outside the narrative affords us no privileged insight ... For Buffy, as for the anti-realist, there is no touchstone or benchmark to which she can appeal, no “God’s-eye view” from which she can look upon both worlds and determine which is real.’ (pp. 2–3). Whedon encourages viewers to question which reality is the ‘right’ one, and thus moves away from the binary of clear-cut hallucinations compared to a ‘real’ world: the boundary is blurred.

There is also a turn away from mental illness being seen as having an internal and genetic cause, to being due to forced consumption of a chemical, perhaps a suggestion of non-consensual medical treatment. We see this again in the storyline of *Alpha and Echo* in the series *Dollhouse* and the subsequent graphic novel *Dollhouse Epitaphs*. Alpha and Echo were both shown to have mental issues that arose from ‘treatments’ performed by a large private company,

a company that profited from clients purchasing ‘dolls’ programmed with specific personalities.

The final image from Buffy’s *Normal Again* is striking. With Buffy left alone in a cell, while stereotypically portrayed, it showed psychiatric treatment as inhumane and leading to isolation and restriction. More powerfully, however, it displayed choosing a hallucination over reality as an option: that sometimes happiness can be found in unreality. Much of psychology and psychiatry refuse to acknowledge the misery and pain that can be experienced in terms of sexism, racism, cisgenderism, heterosexism, and more. There can often be an assumption that happiness means returning to a ‘normal’ life (whatever that may be). Sometimes happiness is madness, and sometimes ‘normality’ is downright miserable. Both can involve pain and suffering.

Conclusions

This brief look at some overarching narratives from characters in the work of Joss Whedon exemplifies how his focus on strong female characters is interwoven into storylines regarding mental distress. Rather than

portray emotional issues as a weakness, a danger, or an inevitability, such behaviours are framed as misunderstood and a result of abuse from governments, capitalist endeavours and acquaintances³. The trope of mental illness and dangerousness becomes reframed as giftedness and strength – a powerful counter to mainstream media narratives that encourage stigma and perpetuate sanism. ■

1. There are many others that could be the focus of an analysis of Whedon’s work and constructions of ‘mental illness’ (e.g. Spike in *Spike Asylum*) and Alpha from *Dollhouse*, as well as intersections between madness and femininity (e.g. Faith in *BtVS*). For the purposes of this brief article, I focus on River Tam and Buffy Summers due to their characters’ prominence in their respective worlds, as well as the popularity and success of both *BtVS* and *Serenity*.

2. *Angel* was the spin off show from *BtVS*, which also became a graphic novel of its own before becoming *Angel & Faith (A&F)*. *A&F* incorporates the storyline of rebellious slayer, Faith.

3. As is the explanation given for Drusilla’s difference – her torment by Angel’s alter ego, Angelus.

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