

Journal of Tolkien Research

Volume 10
Issue 1 *J.R.R. Tolkien and the works of Joss
Whedon*

Article 9

2020

Simon & Samwise: Big Damn Heroes

Andrew Peterson

Independent Scholar, andrewcpeterson@icloud.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Television Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Peterson, Andrew (2020) "Simon & Samwise: Big Damn Heroes," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol10/iss1/9>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Christopher Center Library at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

SIMON & SAMWISE: BIG DAMN HEROES

River Tam and Frodo Baggins are each burdened with the means to end the struggle against a mighty oppressor in *Firefly* and *The Lord of the Rings*, respectively. Each is blessed with a loyal protector who fiercely defends his charge from threats from both the world and within their respective fellowships, as the mercenary Jayne Cobb and the warrior Boromir betray the heroes in the course of their journeys. Finally, it is only the ministration of their protectors that allows River and Frodo to complete their missions. A closer look at both stories will reveal the similarities between River Tam and Frodo Baggins and between the staunch protectors who love them: River's brother Dr. Simon Tam, and Frodo's gardener Samwise Gamgee.

The television series *Firefly* and *Serenity* (the subsequent film) chart the evolution of Simon Tam. Viewers follow as he changes from adoring older brother embarking on a very successful career in medicine into a hero willing to sacrifice his career and life to save River from the Alliance, which has turned her into an assassin through radical brain surgery. When Simon assumes a guardian role over River, she is quite broken for all intents and purposes. It will be up to Simon to carry her until she can be whole again. Compare this to the relationship between Frodo the Ring-bearer and his gardener Samwise, who pledges to aid him as he journeys to Mount Doom to destroy the One Ring. Throughout their travels, Frodo's physical and mental strength will fail him, causing him to become more and more dependent on Samwise until he literally carries Frodo to the end of their journey. River's power waxes over the arc of her story while Frodo's power steadily wanes, yet both Simon Tam and Samwise Gamgee become more than they ever would have been if they did not assume the twin roles of protector and advocate for those in their care. It is the love of these guardians that allows their burdened charges to complete their quests, thus freeing their worlds from the darkness that threatens them.

Love and nurturing are not ordinarily considered heroic attributes and are not usually found in male heroes. Both Simon and Samwise have been trained to nurture, care for, and heal those in their charge - decidedly feminine qualities. Neither man would be considered an exemplar of the traditional action hero. Yet, regarding Tolkien's work, Melanie Rawls observed, "Feminine attributes are not confined to females nor masculine attributes to males. The Macho Man, with his paucity of finer feeling and his neglect of thought in favor of action, is not admired in Middle-earth or Valinor. Neither is the Total Woman, with her wiles and dependence on males" (Rawls 5). This viewpoint is true in the works of Joss Whedon as well. In creating *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Whedon famously upended the trope of the pretty blonde cheerleader who usually gets killed in horror films. Whedon wanted "to subvert that idea and create someone who was a

hero where she had always been a victim" (Billson 25). Just as he toppled the blonde victim trope in *Buffy*, Whedon decided to remake a wealthy, genius doctor into a man of action when creating *Firefly*. Thus, Simon Tam was born.

DR. SIMON TAM

To understand the actions of Dr. Simon Tam in *Firefly*, viewers have to begin with *Serenity*, the post-series film that detailed Simon's rescue of his sister, River. As the scene starts, a disguised Simon watches his sister writhe in pain while listening as Dr. Mathias describes the procedure being used to hurt her. Soon, Simon activates a stun grenade, which allows the siblings to break into an elevator shaft and climb onto a raft that they use to ascend to a waiting ship overhead. Eluding Alliance capture, Simon and River are brought to the planet Persephone.

The facility's security cameras recorded this daring escape. During an increasingly uncomfortable interrogation of Dr. Mathias, the Operative explains to the Alliance doctor, "The boy spent his entire fortune developing the contacts to infiltrate this place." The doctor offers that Simon "gave up a brilliant future in medicine as well. It's madness." The Operative exclaims, "Madness? Have you looked at this scan carefully, doctor? At his face? It's love, in point of fact. Something a good deal more dangerous" (*Serenity*).¹ Love is at the heart of everything that Simon does for River.

In the pilot episode of the series (also called "Serenity"), once Simon and River reach the planet Persephone, the Alliance has already frozen his accounts and issued a warrant for his arrest. After boarding *Firefly* Transport *Serenity*, Simon is mistaken for an undercover agent who is also hiding on board the ship. In truth, it is another passenger – Lawrence Dobson – who was an undercover Alliance agent searching for the Tams. When Dobson's ham-fisted hold on a gun causes the ship's mechanic Kaylee to be seriously injured by a gunshot to the stomach, Simon bribes the ship's captain Malcolm "Mal" Reynolds into keeping him and River safe from Dobson and the Alliance by offering to save Kaylee's life. Mal angrily agrees to this.

When Simon and River boarded *Serenity*, River was initially asleep, hidden within a cryogenic tube. The experiments to turn her into a psychic weapon for use by the Alliance have taken already their toll. As the first few episodes reveal, River has delusions. There are unknown moments that trigger her change into the assassin the Alliance intended. Her moods change mercurially, sliding between happy, childlike, fearful, fearless, tearful, and joyful. This emotional instability is not as Simon remembers his sister at all. He describes pre-Academy River quite succinctly to the crew of *Serenity*: "River was more than

¹ Scripted dialog from the series is from the site *Firefly*: <https://firefly2002.weebly.com/scripts.html>.

gifted. She was a gift. Everything she did, music, math, theoretical physics — even dance — there was nothing that didn't come as naturally to her as breathing does to us" ("Serenity" 1.1).² This is a far cry from the psychotic young woman first introduced to Mal, the passengers and the crew of *Serenity*, and the viewer.

After saving Kaylee, Simon begins his tenure as ship's doctor on *Serenity*. For now, Simon has brought River to safety and a chance to get away from the Alliance's grip. He has joined a fellowship.

Throughout these early episodes, the writers take great care to show us who River was before, thus allowing the audience to have empathy with her. Viewers also see Simon's love for and patience with River, whom he calls Mèi-mèi, which means "little sister." It begins in the pilot episode:

RIVER. I didn't think you'd come for me.

SIMON. Well, you're a dummy. ("Serenity" 1.1)

In the episode "Safe," the viewer is given glimpses of the Tams' life before River left for the Academy. While Simon tends to his studies, River is engaging in flights of fancy. She imagines fighting for the Alliance against the Independents in the Unification War, invoking both cannibalism and dinosaurs in her imaginative story. When Simon reminds River of her own studies she replies, "I learned it all" before informing Simon that the schoolbook he is earnestly studying from is wrong ("Safe" 1.5).

In this flashback, River is engaging, precocious, and present. Both siblings are intellectually gifted, but Simon needs to spend more time concentrating on studies while River picks things up much more quickly. She's easily learned her dance routine, and a casual glance shows her that the book Simon is studying is wrong. Instead of chastising her, he puts his schoolwork aside and fully engages with her. This casual move appears practiced, as if Simon has set his work aside for River's sake before and, as seen in the series premiere, he will do so again.

As noted above, she enjoys dancing. Later in this episode, River wanders away from Simon and finds herself on the edge of a country-dance. River, curious, watches the dancers, and quickly picks up the movements. When Simon finds her, he watches transfixed as River joins the dance. She is graceful, and her smile is wide. So is Simon's, for this is River as she is meant to be—a joyous being—before the Alliance got hold of her.

As Alyssa Rosenberg observes in her essay, "Joss Whedon and the Real Girl,"

² Fox aired *Firefly*'s episodes out of Whedon's intended order. References to episode numbers here are to Whedon's order.

Whedon shows viewers that despite her intelligence and her insanity, River is a plausible girl, whether she's making-believe with her brother in flashbacks, or playing jacks and giggling over gossip with another young woman. Without those details, River might merely be a damaged freak. But when she cries to her brother, 'I function like I'm a girl. I hate it because I know it'll go away!' we care, because we've seen the humor and idiosyncrasy that slip away when she descends into madness. (Rosenberg)

These flashbacks allow us to piece together who River was before the experiments. More importantly, viewers can see that Simon cares for and loves his little sister and why he believed she was worth saving.

Another flashback in "Safe" (1.5) reveals now-adult Simon discussing his concerns about River's whereabouts with his parents, Gabriel and Regan. Simon cites River's letters as a form of code, expressed through misspellings of words, the detailing of family events that never happened, and bizarre phraseology. His society-conscious parents will hear none of it. His mother Regan admonishes Simon, reminding him that if anyone at the hospital heard him talking like this it could jeopardize his career. She willfully ignores the evidence before her eyes, telling Simon that, "Nothing is going to keep you two apart for long" ("Safe" 1.5). Regan is right, but not in the way she ever expected. Simon will soon give up everything he has to rescue River. In rare moments of lucidity, River is aware of all that Simon has done for her, reminding him that he gave up everything he had to find her, to help her. Simon replies, "Mèi mèi . . . Everything I have is right here" ("Safe" 1.5).

Later in this episode, River is kidnapped and accused of being a witch by Hill People. Of course, the only answer is to burn the witch. Seeing that his words do not persuade the ignorant mob, Simon steps up close to his sister, puts his arms around her and says, "Light it." Simon has carried River this far, but he has failed to save her. His love and devotion mean that he will burn with River rather than leave her. If her journey is to end in fire, then so will his. Instead of a fiery death, Mal and the crew of *Serenity* rescue the siblings at the last minute, showing that Simon and River have been accepted into the fold.

JAYNE AND THE THREAT AGAINST THE TAMS

As the series progresses, the rest of the crew of *Serenity* become fond of River, each in their own way. For example, Mal says, "I find River pleasant enough myself" ("Objects in Space" 1.14). But Jayne Cobb is different. Initially a member of a gang that ambushed Malcolm and Zoe on an earlier job, when Mal offers him a larger percentage of future jobs, as well as his cabin of his own, Jayne switches

sides on the spot. It is no surprise that Jayne sees just another excellent opportunity in betraying the Tams to the Alliance for a reward.

The episode "Ariel" (1.9) begins with River taking a big knife from the kitchen and slashing Jayne across the chest with it for no discernible reason. Later, as he's stitched up, Jayne tells Mal that it is time to be rid of the Tams and they may even pick up a reward for their trouble. Jayne has mentioned a reward for the Tams before. In "The Train Job," Jayne suggests that the crew "could all be rich if we handed her back." He tells Kaylee that Mal must be thinking the same thing: "He ain't stupid. Why would he bring on trouble like those two if there weren't no profit in it?" ("The Train Job" 1.2).

There are also mitigating circumstances here, as Mal has not found any work on the last three worlds they've been to before reaching Ariel. Also, viewers know that Jayne will not hesitate to enrich himself at the expense of others, as he did in "Safe" when he looted Simon's room after Hill People abducted the doctor and River. It has been painfully obvious from the start that Jayne is highly motivated by money. While Mal takes jobs to earn money to keep *Serenity* flying, it also affords him a life away from the Alliance. On some level, Mal can sympathize with the plight of the Tams. Mal is motivated by an ideal; Jayne is motivated by personal gain. Mal may not want to betray the Tams, but Jayne has no such reluctance.

At this point in their story, River has been regressing, experiencing more and more psychotic episodes. Simon needs more medical information regarding his sister, and Ariel is the best place to find this information. Thankfully, Simon has come up with an ingenious plan of enriching the crew by stealing valuable medical supplies undetected, in exchange for the crew's assistance breaking into an Alliance Hospital to use advanced medical equipment there to scan River's brain. Jayne is to guard Simon as he analyzes River's condition. Unfortunately, Jayne has also made a call to the Alliance, hoping to cash in on the bounty that is offered for the Tams' capture. Jayne's betrayal is now front and center.

Still, Simon's plan has borne fruit. The neuro-image scans of River's brain are quite revealing. This knowledge will allow Simon to actively work on a medical response to his sister's condition. Predictably, Jayne is double-crossed by the Alliance officer and he is forced to work on an escape with the blissfully ignorant Tams in tow. After successfully returning to *Serenity*, Mal privately confronts Jayne about his betrayal, knocking him unconscious and throwing him into an airlock with a partially open door. *Serenity* will soon be in the vacuum of space, and Jayne will be sucked through the small opening to his death. In the ensuing conversation, Jayne cannot comprehend that his betrayal of Simon and River is also a betrayal of Mal, who spells it out for Jayne when he says, "You turn on any of my crew, you turn on me...You did it to me, Jayne. And that's a fact" ("Ariel" 1.9). Mal leaves Jayne to his fate. Before Mal leaves, though, Jayne

asks him to make something up instead of telling the crew he betrayed the Tams. Jayne's desire to be remembered positively reveals another facet to his personality.

At this moment, Jayne has shown remorse for what he had done, proving he is not beyond redemption. Mal saves Jayne because he is also a member of the crew, and Mal's loyalty to his crew runs deep. At this moment, Mal allows Jayne to become the man Jayne has the potential to become.

Meanwhile, Simon is ready to administer a treatment that might work to help River, thanks to the information that he gleaned from the scans of her brain. River believes that she is going to sleep again, as she was in the pilot episode. Simon takes River's hand and replies, "No, Mèi mèi. It's time to wake up" ("Ariel" 1.9). Simon's protection of River finally has paid off. From here on until the movie *Serenity*, River grows more coherent throughout her story, slowly but assuredly rebuilding herself.

SAMWISE GAMGEE

Samwise Gamgee is introduced to the reader through his father, Ham Gamgee ("the Gaffer"), who has tended the garden at Bag End for forty years. In fact, he is considered an expert on vegetables in the region, especially potatoes. However, the aging Ham passed his responsibilities to his youngest son, Sam.

Sam does not appear to have any aspirations beyond tending the garden at Bag End, due in no small part to his father's advice: "Elves and Dragons! I says to him. 'Cabbages and potatoes are better for me and you. Don't go getting mixed up in the business of your betters, or you'll land in trouble too big for you,' I says to him" (*LotR* §1.01.024).³ In short, Sam is actively being steered to a simple life. After all, "Hobbits are not born heroes" (Crowe 7).

Yet, there is more to Sam than meets the eye. As the Gaffer explains, "He's in and out of Bag End. Crazy about stories of the old days, he is, and he listens to all Mr. Bilbo's tales. Mr. Bilbo has learned him his letters — meaning no harm, mark you, and I hope no harm will come of it" (*LotR* §1.01.020). Sam refers to dragons, Tree-men (Ents), and Elves. Readers are told, "He believed he had once seen an Elf in the woods, and still hoped to see more one day." (*LotR* §1.02.029). When Sam tells Ted and others of the Elves sailing into the West, he does so "half chanting the words, shaking his head sadly and solemnly" (*LotR* §1.02.027). Sam is just a gardener, but his vision—in certain moments—extends much farther. His curiosity would soon allow him to travel further than he ever expected.

³ Citations to *The Lord of the Rings* use the LRC system documented by Erik Mueller-Harder LLC., <https://lrc.vermontsoftworks.com/>. A conversion web app is also available.

Gandalf reappears on the doorstep of Bag End and speaks at length with Frodo about the true identity of the ring that Bilbo brought back from his adventures with the dwarves. After a time, Gandalf declares, "This is the Master-ring, the One Ring to rule them all. This is the One Ring that he lost many ages ago, to the great weakening of his power. He greatly desires it—but he must not get it" (*LotR* §1.02.080). All the while, Sam is tending to his gardening, right near the window where this conversation is taking place. Frodo has just concluded that he should leave the Shire with the Ring, and Gandalf offers, "But I don't think you need go alone. Not if you know of anyone you can trust, and who would be willing to go by your side — and that you would be willing to take into unknown perils. But if you look for a companion, be careful in choosing!" (*LotR* §1.02.180).

Gandalf discovers Sam purposely eavesdropping and calls him to task for it. Gandalf declares that instead of punishing Sam for his intrusion:

“I have thought of something better than that. Something to shut your mouth, and punish you properly for listening. You shall go away with Mr. Frodo!”

“Me, sir!” cried Sam, springing up like a dog invited for a walk. “Me go and see Elves and all! Hooray!” he shouted, and then burst into tears. (*LotR* §1.02.193–4)

His life as a gardener, as preordained as Simon's life as a brilliant surgeon, is being disrupted for the greater good. Sam—learning that one should be careful what one wishes for—is going to have his adventure, after all.

The difference here is that the information Simon has received regarding River through informants in the Blackout Zone has detailed the threats to River before he began his journey. Conversely, Sam has heard Gandalf's tale but looks upon the journey as a chance to see Elves. His tears denote intense happiness and apprehension and excitement that suddenly overwhelmed him. Of course, "the real hero does not seek to set out for adventure, but rather that he already finds himself in one long before he goes looking for it" (Lakowski 25). However, Sam is far more ignorant of the journey that he is about to take than Simon is concerning his own journey.

Another important distinction here is the difference between Frodo and River at the start of their journeys. Throughout the beginning of *LotR* the reader is introduced to a hobbit who is both intelligent and inquisitive, as evidenced by his interest in Bilbo's stories and Elvish things. He is selfless, for even after he hears of the history and danger of the One Ring, replies, "As far as I understand what you have said, I suppose I must keep the Ring and guard it, at least for the present, whatever it may do to me" (*LotR* §1.01.173). Frodo may have a wanderlust that is

yet unfulfilled, but at the start of his story, he is the master of Bag End, well off financially, well educated, and respected (for the most part) by his neighbors. He is whole.

The same cannot be said about River, who is at the lowest point of her life when introduced to the viewers. Her childlike and innocent demeanor masks a desperately unstable mind and belies the surprisingly deadly physical capabilities that she has learned while at the Academy. Her rare moments of clarity are overshadowed by the deep psychosis inflicted upon her as the Alliance doctors repeatedly operated on her brain. Her psychic episodes are disjointed so that potentially useful information is lost in the morass of instability within River's psyche. In short, she is broken.

Simon and Sam are as different from each other as those in their care. Simon is a genius, a member of high society, and a brilliant surgeon. His life promises to be full of prestige, financial reward, and an even higher place in society. Meanwhile, Sam is a gardener with a curiosity about Elves, Oliphants, and the world around him. However, Sam is expected to spend his life in the Shire as a gardener, serving a master just as his father and grandfather did before him.

BOROMIR AND THE THREAT AGAINST FRODO

Once Frodo and Sam arrive in Rivendell, readers meet Boromir, the Captain-General in Gondor's army, during the Council of Elrond. Of Boromir, Aragorn says, "He is a valiant man" (*LotR* §2.03.041). He has a strong personality, which is evident early in their discussion, as Boromir makes an impassioned plea to be allowed to use the Ring against Sauron and the forces of evil.

Of course, Elrond dismisses this idea, noting, "The very desire of it corrupts the heart" (*LotR* §2.02.231). And corrupt his heart it does, for Boromir still desires the Ring, long after the party leaves Rivendell. While this may be due to the influence of the Ring, he is first and foremost a soldier who has been at war for a long time and longs for the final victory over his enemies. When the party reaches Amon Hen, Boromir sees an opportunity to persuade Frodo to give him the Ring, allowing him to drive the hosts of Mordor as men flock to his banner.

Like Jayne, Boromir is blinded — but not by greed. Boromir truly desires to bring victory to Gondor and the free peoples of Middle-earth by any means possible. If this results in personal glory for Boromir, then so be it. He may be a bit vainglorious, but he is fundamentally a good man. Of course, the Ring delights in corrupting good people. When Frodo recoils at Boromir's honeyed and forceful words, Boromir sees his chance: "Suddenly he sprang over the stone and leaped at Frodo. His fair and pleasant face was hideously changed; a raging fire was in his eyes" (*LotR* §2.10.047).

Frodo escapes and Boromir's fit soon passes. 'What have I said?' he cried. 'What have I done? Frodo, Frodo!' he called. 'Come back! A madness took me, but it has passed. Come back!'" (*LotR* §2.10.050). When Boromir rejoins the party, Aragorn is skeptical of his claim that he had merely "urged him to come to Minas Tirith and not to go east. I grew angry and he left me. He vanished" (*LotR* §2.10.080–3).

Sadly, Boromir will get the chance to finish his story, but he will do so with his last breath. Aragorn—hearing the horn—rushes to find Boromir mortally wounded after protecting Merry and Pippin in a fierce battle with Orcs: "Aragorn knelt beside him. Boromir opened his eyes and strove to speak. At last slow words came. 'I tried to take the Ring from Frodo,' he said. 'I am sorry. I have paid'" (*LotR* §3.01.007–8).

After a brief exchange, Boromir breathes his last and speaks no more.

It was undoubtedly the influence of the Ring that prompted Boromir to attack Frodo. It could also be partly Boromir's own hubris. Tom Shippey states, "Kind as he is, one can imagine Boromir as a Ringwraith; his never-quite-stated opinion that 'the ends justifies the means' adds a credible perspective to corruption" (138). However, it is difficult to avoid the similarities between Jayne and Boromir as they stared into the abyss. Thwarted in their attempts to receive their desired rewards, both repented their actions and said so to their accusers. Both knew that they had betrayed their leader. However, in the moment of truth, Jayne was forthcoming to Mal where Boromir hid the whole story from Aragorn. Jayne was spared; Boromir paid with his life.

THE WANING STRENGTH OF FRODO BAGGINS

Frodo, at the height of his physical and mental strength, agrees to bring the Ring to Rivendell. He is put to the test before too long. First, Frodo is nearly caught by one of the Nazgûl before leaving Bree. Captured by Barrow-wights, Frodo must resist the lure of the Ring before escaping. Later, the Witch-king wounds Frodo at Weathertop. The injury caused by the Morgul-blade will never entirely heal and will always give Frodo pain. Finally, Frodo arrives in Rivendell, not under his own power but as one on the brink of death and pursued by the Nazgûl. Still, he persists. During the Council of Elrond, Frodo agrees to be the Ring-Bearer and travel to Mordor: "'I will take the Ring,' he said, 'though I do not know the way'" (*LotR* §2.02.254). Nevertheless, he begins the journey to Mount Doom. However, with each step, the weight of the One Ring grows heavier, and Frodo is burdened. After Boromir tries to take the Ring, Frodo escapes and decides that it is best to go to Mordor alone. Sam will not hear of it. He deduces where Frodo has sneaked off to and gets there in time to join Frodo in one of the boats. Frodo wants Sam to stay safely behind, but the young gardener/protector won't hear of it, urging "I'm

coming too, or neither of us isn't going. I'll knock holes in all the boats first" (*LotR* §2.10.111–14).

Sam's persistence breaks Frodo's resistance. Finally, Frodo declares, "It is no good trying to escape you. But I'm glad, Sam. I cannot tell you how glad. Come along! It is plain that we were meant to go together" (*LotR* §2.10.117). Frodo and Sam begin their journey together, as the protector and his charge walk into the Land of Shadow.

In assuming this role of protector, Stephen Potts explained that, "Sam thus has evolved from the child-like subordinate to a gentle but parental authority figure, and for the rest of the Quest he is in charge" (9). However, this parental authority is decidedly feminine, as Sam infuses his responsibilities with the love he feels for Frodo. In fact, love is at the heart of everything that Samwise does for Frodo. Tolkien defined 'love' as the essential characteristic of Sam's personality:

I think the simple 'rustic' love of Sam and his Rosie (nowhere elaborated) is *absolutely essential* to the study of his (the chief hero's) character, and to the theme of the relation of ordinary life (breathing, eating, working, begetting) and quests, sacrifice, causes, and the 'longing for Elves', and sheer beauty. (*Letters* 161, #131)

Edith Crowe observed, "Perhaps Sam's power to resist the lure of the Ring comes from his overriding motivation: a totally selfless loves for others, especially Frodo." (8) She might be right. Tolkien himself noted, "He [Sam] did not think of himself as heroic or even brave, or in any way admirable – except in his service and loyalty to his master" (*Letters* 329, #246). It is this selfless love that propels Sam forward.

When the time finally comes to cast the Ring into the Cracks of Doom, Frodo is at his weakest and most vulnerable point. Frodo has been wounded by Shelob, taken prisoner by orcs and imprisoned in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, where he had been beaten and starved. He was forced to march with a band of orcs, leaving behind armor that he does not have the strength to bear, and weapons that he does not have the power to wield. He abandoned all of his defenses on the march through Mordor. In his way, Frodo is as naked as River had been when viewers first see her in the pilot episode of *Firefly*.

With each step, Frodo becomes an even ghostlier shade of the robust hobbit that he had been when the journey began. Frodo is so wretchedly weak that he can scarcely crawl the final miles: "Frodo groaned; but with a great effort of will he staggered up; and then he fell upon his knees again...and then pitifully he began to crawl forward on his hands" (*LotR* §6.03.051). It is up to Sam to carry a

now-broken Frodo up the slope of the mountain until he can destroy the Ring and become whole again:

“Come, Mr. Frodo!” he cried. “I can’t carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well. So up you get! Come on, Mr. Frodo dear! Sam will give you a ride. Just tell him where to go, and he’ll go.” (*LotR* §6.03.053–4)

Here, Sam becomes a Ring-Bearer once more, for Frodo is at his weakest point when he needs to be at his strongest. Alas, it is here, in his weakness, that the Ring claims Frodo and Frodo claims the Ring: “I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!” (*LotR* §6.03.087).

Later, after Frodo has claimed the Ring, Gollum bites off the finger on which it rode, and falls into the lava, thus fulfilling the quest. However, the destruction of the One Ring has precipitated the destruction of Mount Doom. As Sam comforts Frodo on the precipice of their destruction, Frodo says lovingly, “I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam” (*LotR* §6.03.099). In this moment, Samwise would burn with Frodo rather than leave him. If Frodo’s journey is to end here, then so does his. At the end of the world, the love between these two hobbits is a saving grace.

As in the case of the Tams, their destruction is not to be, and the two hobbits are returned to safety on the wings of the eagles. Yet, while Sam is ultimately no worse for wear, Frodo will never again be the same. As he describes: “I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them” (*LotR* §6.09.082). Thus, broken beyond repair, the savior of Middle-earth boards a white ship at the Grey Havens and sails into the West at last.

THE WAXING STRENGTH OF RIVER TAM

Conversely, in the movie *Serenity*, River goes from broken girl to whole assassin. First, after watching a commercial for Fruity Oaty Bars with a subliminal message built into it to trigger River, she attacks the patrons in a bar and pulls a gun on Mal. She is only stopped when Simon arrives and uses a code word to put her to sleep. Later, one of River’s outbursts shows the crew the meaning of “Miranda,” which is a planet where the Alliance performed experiments on the population to make them more docile. When the crew of *Serenity* hatches a plan to get this information out to the general population, they are forced to make a last stand and hold off the Reavers in a hallway while Mal transmits the message. During the battle, a stray bullet hits Simon. Unfortunately, his medi-kit is in the corridor beyond the blast door. River, who has grown more and more lucid as this journey

continued, goes to her brother's side. "You take care of me, Simon. You've always taken care of me. My turn" (*Serenity*). She dives through the door gap, throws Simon's med-kit back through, and closes the door as Reavers swarm her. Later, after the battle has ended, the doors reopen, and River stands before a roomful of dead Reavers, all killed by her hand. The once protected has become the protector.

The secrets of the Alliance are now out in the open and River, thanks to Simon's constant ministrations of her, has once again been made (mostly) whole. So much so, that it is River co-piloting *Serenity* alongside Mal at the end of the film. She has an aptitude for flying but Mal explains that there is more to flying than know-how:

MAL. But it ain't all buttons and charts, little albatross. You know what the first rule of flying is? Well, I suppose you do, since you already know what I'm about to say.

RIVER. I do. But I like to hear you say it.

MAL. Love. You can learn all the math in the 'Verse, but you take a boat in the air that you don't love, she'll shake you off just as sure as the turning of the worlds. Love keeps her in the air when she oughta fall down, tells you she's hurtin' 'fore she keens. Makes her a home. (*Serenity*).

Once again, it is love that is center stage during the great moments of Simon and River, Sam and Frodo. It is the strength of love found within Simon and Sam that allowed these guardians to become more than they were destined to be and instead become "big damn heroes" ("Safe" 1.5).

Simon, through the gift of his prodigious intellect, was trained as a surgeon. Sam, due to financial circumstances, followed his father and grandfather into their trade as a gardener. Yet, while Simon may be inexperienced, his intellect assures that he is never overlooked. His skills as a doctor make him a valuable tool onboard *Serenity*. Sam may have been the equivalent of Frodo's batman (a soldier who was required to look after an officer's kit and cook, clean, and fight for him), but no one doubted his abilities to protect Frodo along the way to Mount Doom. It is precisely because of their nurturing instincts and training that they were considered valuable to their respective Fellowships. Studying Tolkien, Rawls describes this fusion of qualities as a being, "Equal yet other, in stature and power" (13).

Because Simon and Sam excelled in nurturing and care they found the strength to become more than they would have been if events had not forced them into action. Their care for the other follows the idea that "The Feminine Principle shapes individuals. The Masculine Principle shapes events. But as individuals are

shaped by events, so are events determined by individuals — there is no escape from the complementarity of these polar principles" (Rawls 10). River would have become the prototype of Alliance assassins without Simon. The Ring would have fallen into the wrong hands without Sam. In these instances, the heroic quest succeeds because the Feminine Principle is allowed to fuse with Masculine Principle. As such, Simon and Sam are more than just the sum of their masculine parts.

Rawls conjectures that "This diversity adds dimension and complexity to (Tolkien's) characters" (13). It works with Whedon's characters, too. Simon Tam was destined to be a brilliant surgeon assigned to a major hospital on the Core Worlds. He was a genius. Samwise Gamgee was destined to be the gardener for his master, Frodo Baggins and, while he may have dreamed of faraway lands, Elves, and Oliphants, he was never going to leave the Shire. However, fate had other plans. These men's love for their charges changed the course of their lives, and the worlds they lived in. Simon's restoration of River revealed the duplicity of the Alliance in brainwashing its citizens into obedience. Sam's aid in bringing Frodo to the Cracks of Doom saved Middle-earth from the dominion of Sauron. By embracing the Feminine Principle and offering themselves to protect those in their charge, Dr. Simon Tam and gardener Samwise Gamgee can successfully shape the events in their world via the Masculine Principle. In so doing, they are the big damn heroes of their times.

REFERENCES

- "Ariel." *Firefly*, season 1, episode 9, Fox, 2002-11-15.
- Billson, Anne. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. BFI, 2005.
- Crowe, Edith. "The Many Faces of Heroism in Tolkien." *Mythlore* 10.2 (#36) (1983): 5–8.
- Lakowski, Romuald Ian. "Types of Heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*." *Mythlore* 23.4 (#90) (2002): 22–35.
- "Objects in Space." *Firefly*, season 1, episode 14, Fox, 2002-12-13.
- "Out of Gas." *Firefly*, season 1, episode 8, 2002-10-25.
- Potts, Stephen (1991) "The Many Faces of the Hero in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 17: No. 4, Article 1.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol17/iss4/1>
- Rawls, Melanie. "The Feminine Principle in Tolkien." *Mythlore* 10.4 (#38) (1984): 5-13
- Rosenberg, Alyssa. "Joss Whedon and the Real Girl." *The Atlantic*, March, 2009.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/03/joss-whedon-and-the-real-girl/307363/>

- “Safe.” *Firefly*, season 1, episode 5, Fox, 2002-11-08.
- Serenity*. Written and directed by Joss Whedon, Universal Pictures, 2005.
- “Serenity.” *Firefly*, season 1, episode 1, Fox, 2002-12-20.
- Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*. Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th Anniversary Edition. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- “The Train Job.” *Firefly*, season 1, episode 2, Fox, 2002-09-20.