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"Why aren't you awesomed by me?"

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July 20 2008

The Hator Legacy takes a feminist look at Doctor Horrible , and finds him wanting. Along the same lines Rebecca Allen and Den Of Geek have Horrible Thoughts.

TheDivineGoat | Dr. Horrible | 19:50 CET | 171 comments total | tags:

Interesting article.

Penny was underdeveloped, and thus as a character was not up to par with Joss's usual work.

But i would have to counter their argument and say that it was penny's innocence and simplicity that drew Dr. Horrible to her. His world was utterly complex, and he found solace in one that wasn't.

feliceg | July 20, 21:05 CET

Yeah, despite being a pretty damn good little show, Dr. Horrible isn't exactly up to the standard set by, say, Buffy, in terms of gender politics. Not to mention the fact that it had exactly no named characters of color. Yet another bizarro parallel universe in which Southern California is mostly white.

Come on, Joss. We know you can do better than this! I push because I love.

rufustfyrfly | July 20, 21:23 CET

Oy.

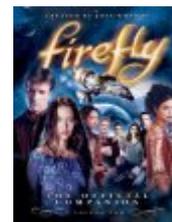
theonetruebix | July 20, 21:24 CET

I think this was a little silly.

You know, not EVERY female character has to be strong and complex. And neither the male characters needs to. Cliches CAN be used in a good way, sometimes.

But with that said, I don't think that Penny was JUST the girl between the Doc and Capt. She was innocent (yes, and that is not bad), and she was simple (again, not bad), and she was good. She

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believed in good, and she believed in people. I can not imagine a better compliment then that. And she played a important part in changing Billy's life (almost for good... when he did NOT kill Capt. Hammer, but at the end, for bad, with his death), and kind of changed Capt. Hammer (In his very own bizarre way, he said some good things...).

I don't see her as the one to be 'rescued'. Yes, she was rescued by Capt. Hammer and then fell in love with him. But I don't see a problem with that. I mean, if it was a man rescued buy a woman super-hero, and he fell in love with her, it would be ok?. But I don't see her as the week one. She did things for herself. She fought for what she believed in.

in exactly the kind of death scene we've complained about several times on this site - one that serves almost exclusively to progress the character development of the men in her life.

Again, if a male character dies and serves for the progress of a female character, would it be ok?

I think that one of the best things in Joss' works is the EQUALITY. It's not about 'Women are more important than men', is about 'We're all the same. Women. Man. And we should be treated like this. The same.' ... And I absolutely don't see Penny being a smaller character because is a female character.

She is the less developed between the 3 main characters, but the story was, after all, named Dr. Horrible Sings Along-Blog. And not Dr. Horrible and Penny sings along-blog.

Don't no if I made myself clear. But the point is, GIVE JOSS A BREAK! ... He write the best characters, women and man. He fights for EQUALITY NOW. And this was a 45 min project. I don't think is possible to develop EVERYTHING equally in so little time.

And btw, I'm a girl.

[edited by maxsummers on 2008-07-20 21:33]

[edited by maxsummers on 2008-07-20 21:35]

maxsummers | July 20, 21:31 CET

Joss, why do you write such weak female characters?

[I'm kidding! I'm kidding!]

I kept waiting for Penny to be more than she was (I was hoping she'd appear in her Bad-Horse riding gear after the credits and yell, "Psych!"), but it was Dr. Horrible's story, after all, and we did learn

quite a few things about her in 45 minutes: she had a hard life, she was kind of sad, a little timid, kind-hearted and naive to the point of blindness, and she enjoyed doing her laundry. Not all females have strong characters.

And Captain Hammer wasn't exactly developed, either. Three layers of cheese, if you ask me.

jcs | July 20, 21:34 CET

I thought that was a fair article.

This was not my favourite Joss work, redeemed for me by Nathan in a tight black t-shirt.

Yes, I'm shallow.

redeem147 | July 20, 21:46 CET

The irony of saying this was a fair article about how it's wrong that the woman was undeveloped while also saying the piece is redeemed by a shallow appreciation of men in tight shirts is kind of stunning.

theonetruebix | July 20, 21:55 CET

Well, maybe I'm just letting go some repress feelings about multiculturalism, 'cause I had the most exhausting class at college this last period where we studied subjects like feminism on tv and stuff. And a lot of things seemed a little over-analysed for me, like this article.

And maybe I'm over analysing this article? *ok, off to get some sleep now...*

maxsummers | July 20, 21:57 CET

I thought it was an interesting article . Joss and his fans often speak about feminism in his work, it's not terribly surprising therefore that even a short piece of work like Doctor Horrible is going to attract analysis .

debw | July 20, 22:02 CET

Bix,it was meant to be ;)

I said the article was fair. I didn't say I was.

redeem147 | July 20, 22:05 CET

debw, it's not that Joss' work attracts analysis that gets to me. It's that (and this feeling isn't at all limited to feminist analysis) there seems to be a sub-culture out there that doesn't often demonstrate a capacity to enjoy anything, ever.

Granted, that's unfair as a statement in this context, because I haven't actually browsed beyond the link here to see if the person or persons in question falls into that annoying trap or not. It's entirely possible they don't.

But I've found myself too often mired in the writings of people who seem incapable of ever just enjoying something that I no longer give analysis the benefit of the doubt. Heh.

theonetruebix | July 20, 22:09 CET

Not to mention the fact that it had exactly no named characters of color. Yet another bizarro parallel universe in which Southern California is mostly white.

Why is it a problem that it had white lead actors (and supporting characters...which is pretty much just Moist) ? Joss has been better than some with the inclusion of talented actors of color playing worthwhile main or major characters. Gunn, Robin Wood, Jasmine, Zoe, Gaving Park (okay he wasn't exactly my favorite, but he ended up as Jin on **Lost**), The Operative...

One of Hammer's (and later Horrible's) groupies was Asian and a black homeless man shook the Captain's hand in the soup kitchen. I know I spotted some extras that weren't white.

Also gotta consider that for this project they used people they knew, it was a volunteer freebie sort of thing they did as a result of the strike. Most of the actors Joss has worked with are white (NPH known by association), so the chances were good that most if not all of the cast would be white given the pool of talent he had to pull from. And if either Captain Hammer or Dr. Horrible were black or maybe even played by any other non-Caucasian actors, you know people would *still* create some kind of controversy (given what happens to them both and how monumentally flawed they are). I'm not saying Joss shouldn't have used a non-white actor to play those roles, but if he did, instead of complaints about there being only Caucasians there would be some other complaint about the black dude being the villain (or if Penny was black, someone would complain she was the project's token for killing-off). I would've been fine with Hammer of Horrible being non-white, I think it's safe to speak for just about everyone here in saying they'd be okay with that too...but someone (not necessarily you) would find something to bitch about.

Casting is tricky.

[edited by Kris on 2008-07-20 22:14]

Kris | July 20, 22:10 CET

And here I was thinking one of the cornerstone principles of feminism was that "men are bad". A principle DHSAB has in bucketloads.

(And when there's only three main characters, and the story is about the love triangle between them, is there really any point in complaining that only one of them is female?)

daylight | July 20, 22:10 CET

Heh.

Apart from the comedy/musical aspect, and Nathan Fillion playing a jackass, what made me interested in *Dr Horrible* was the idea that Joss was focusing on a non-supernaturally-gifted MALE.

'twas refreshing. :)

shrugs Okay, so Penny wasn't all that developed - but we got to see what Dr Horrible loved about her, and oddly some of that totally went against what he desired... to be evil as. That's enough. I don't need to know everything.

Braeden Fireheart | July 20, 22:12 CET

What I would like to know is why something like Dr. Horrible can't be just entertainment and enjoyed in that way? Why does there have to be an analysis based on some person's life agenda?

I just don't understand. And I don't think I want to either.

Scaniano | July 20, 22:15 CET

"what made me interested in Dr Horrible was the idea that Joss was focusing on a non-supernaturally-gifted MALE"

Wasn't Mal Reynolds one of those?

"What I would like to know is why something like Dr. Horrible can't be just entertainment and enjoyed in that way?"

It can be but I don't see why it can't be analysed. After all the 866 posts long (and counting) thread called "Doctor Horrible Act III (The Big Finale) is Live" isn't all full of "well, that was good" comments is it?

[edited by mole75 on 2008-07-20 22:19]

mole75 | July 20, 22:16 CET

It's interesting how easy it is to overlook Penny's contributions to the homeless. In a way, she's the one provoking the most social change - Hammer just beats people up, and Dr. Horrible steals money. I think it's more a product of our cultural bias that we see it as weak and uninteresting to care about people and see the potential good in them. She sees the good in both Horrible and Hammer, and even gets Hammer to admit that violence isn't always the solution, and she does it all in a quiet and gentle way that is more effective than their blustering. Unfortunately, we don't find getting signatures and opening homeless shelters as exciting as Freeze-Rays and muscle - and I think Joss is very aware of that, making a point here once again by tweaking our cultural expectations. Only he's playing this one very under the radar.

zoinkers | July 20, 22:18 CET

I think they have valid points, even though I also think that Joss was purposely trying to use the stereotypes to say certain things. Admittedly, there was a part of me that had thought, before seeing Act III, that Joss might deal with the growth of both Dr. Horrible and Penny. I would not have minded seeing them each grow in counterpoint to each other and Penny to end up facing the world in some way that she had been avoiding.

I think since Joss does admit to having a feminist sensibility, it is valid to analyze his work through a feminist perspective. I am wary of judging people as not having the capacity or willingness to have fun. I have heard similar things said about people who do not like to get sloppy drunk or who do not like bodily function humor.

newcj | July 20, 22:21 CET

I hoped that Penny would suddenly come at her sense and kick Captain Hammer ass and go "saving" Billy from himself, until the end. I was sad for her. But I agree with the most of you guys, Joss couldn't develop her more, due to the lack of time.

I'm still thinking he will bring her back as the most of comic hero.

AND criticize Joss because ONCE he didn't do a strong woman is just crazy.

Beside that... I can't wait for DVD & sequel(s)!

Chandramas | July 20, 22:24 CET

there seems to be a sub-culture out there that doesn't often demonstrate a capacity to enjoy anything, ever.

Getting to enjoy things without analysis is a privilege that some get to have because they don't have to be aware of certain pervasive patterns and inequalities that plague most modern media.

As a woman and a person of color, I don't have the privilege of ignoring those things. They're apparent to me and as glaring as daylight. When women are always represented as sainted objects of desire with no agency or choices who only exist to motivate male characters, I notice that, because I am a woman. When faces of color are the exception and not the rule when it comes to main characters in media, I notice that, because I am a person of color. I don't get to see reflections of myself on television as either a well-rounded female human being who is in charge of her own destiny, nor as a non-white person who is not relegated to the background.

Joss has been better than most when it comes to feminist issues, but that doesn't mean he gets a free pass on engaging in this pattern. Penny was nothing more than a flawless object of desire who never made any real choices nor had any agency. She was the sacrificial woman, the shiny diamond Macguffin. She existed only as the catalyst for Dr. Horrible's descent. She died hiding and oblivious to the machinations around her. She died without opinion and without action.

And that would be all fine and dandy if this weren't a common pattern that plays itself out over and over again on television and in other media. One could argue then that sometimes characters are just weak. Sometimes they are oblivious and sacrificial. But as it stands, these character, over and over and over again, are women. It's a pattern that deserves breaking. And until it's not a pervasive pattern, I don't think it can be dismissed as overanalysis to point out that this is yet another example of that, no matter the source and no matter the past.

Dr. Horrible doesn't exist in a vacuum, it exists in a much larger context where this is a noticeable problem that needs to be addressed.

Melisande | July 20, 22:26 CET

From the article:

"it depended entirely upon playing out their battle with one another using a woman's body as a way of scoring points"

I think they got this completely wrong in regards to Billy. He liked Penny for her personality too. Only initially was it because she was cute (and yeah, he's a stalker). By the time Hammer got involved, he'd already met her and talked with her, he knew her a bit. When

their battle for the girl really got going in the laundromat in Act 2, they definitely knew each other a little better at that point (I assume maybe some hanging out in between her dates with Hammer--at least a few days passed after Act 1). Hammer was the one who was entirely superficial and just about nailing the girl to show up his nemesis...whether he came to care much about Penny beyond that it's hard to say. Was he using her solely for public image and a guaranteed sex partner ? Maybe we'll get a mention or something if this thing gets a sequel.

Kris | July 20, 22:27 CET

Dear people take pop culture way too seriously,

Instead of focusing on easy targets, take a look at difficult issues. Have a look at the role of the woman in third world countries, debate about whether religion and the modern woman can co-exist and wonder if there's too many women in prisons. You know serious issues like that. Wasting time on whether a character who had twenty minutes screen time should have been killed off is not what your foremothers fought for.

Simon | July 20, 22:28 CET

Penny was nothing more than a flawless object of desire who never made any real choices nor had any agency.

See, this is part of what gets me about agenda analysis: I don't think this statement is correct, but it serves the purpose of the analysis, so it gets used.

Penny's hope was so large and all-encompassing that it blinded her to the way the world was really working, and who the people around her really were. That's not "flawless".

Penny, despite or because of whatever her life was like in the past, had made the decision to help "a city barely coping". That's not "never made any real choices", just because those choices didn't happen on screen.

She also made the choice to try to engage with Billy, only to be rebuffed by him so he could steal wonderflonium. She made the choice to go out with Captain Hammer, despite her initial instincts.

One might not like these choices, but they are choices. And one might not like that some of these choices might have been bad ones that got her into the middle of something that killed her, but that doesn't make them not choices, and it doesn't make them "not feminist enough".

Maybe it can be seen this way: Maybe showing a woman making

dubious choices and ending up dead is a feminist statement. Or is it only permissible to make feminist statements by showing strong women making correct choices, and horrible men doing bad things to women?

ETA that you might note how agenda analysis get to have it both ways: If it were the case that Penny were "flawless", they'd get to criticize that as some sort of underdeveloped objectification. But if she were flawed, they'd get to criticize that as not showing a strong woman.

It's a pointless game.

[edited by theonetruebix on 2008-07-20 22:38]

theonetruebix | July 20, 22:36 CET

Simon, I think that's entirely unfair of you. You have no idea what I or anyone else does to further the cause of feminist issues in the world, and it's extremely dismissive and insulting to imply that anyone who takes a spare few minutes out of their day to point out some feminist issues in Dr. Horrible is somehow doing it at the expense of "real" and "important" issues. It is possible to do both, after all. The presentation of women and minorities in media may be much less important than larger issues like gender/race equality and treatment around the world, but that doesn't mean that it is *unimportant* or irrelevant. Media is one way these issues perpetuate themselves, and addressing these patterns *is* important.

Melisande | July 20, 22:36 CET

Not going into the individual points, that might well be valid, here, but I do find myself very jaded with some feminist arguments. After that one on LJ a while back about Firefly/Serenity that was so vitriolic and plain *wrong* it made me feel ill reading it, I'm wary of reading more. When it comes down to it, anything can be interpreted as you want it to be, whether that's positive or negative.

Finally, let me just say, it drives me insane reading some comments that want powerful women and weak men in **everything** they see, and anything that doesn't hold to that is somehow *anti-feminist*. This is clearly absurd. I'm very much for strong female characters, but that doesn't mean they have to be in everything. Not every person is strong, and this includes some women. I'd also challenge the point that Penny was "weak" anyway, but that's a separate argument.

That said, I am aware that a lot of popular culture is very misogynistic, and I can appreciate that people are tired of this, and want to see powerful women for a change. My previous mini-rant wasn't about these people, because I think they're entirely justified.

But Joss is one of those who responds to this, and has written many strong female characters in the past. Really, he's not the person to be targeting here.

(Edited for clarification and grammar.)

[edited by MattK on 2008-07-20 22:40]

MattK | July 20, 22:38 CET

"Wasting time on whether a character who had twenty minutes screen time should have been killed off is not what your foremothers fought for."

Haha. Frankly, I think those articles are as silly although not as silly as those people who declare that killing Tara was some woman-hating gesture or that article that called Inara oriental. Besides, as someone upthread said, not every woman actually is strong and independent. Feminism isn't about pretending that every woman is stronger - and every man weaker - than is true in reality. It should be about what Joss has said before (with regards to BSG): just people - entirely regardless of their sex - being people.

Let Down | July 20, 22:41 CET

"The presentation of women and minorities in media may be much less important than larger issues like gender/race equality and treatment around the world, but that doesn't mean that it is unimportant or irrelevant."

You're right -- it isn't irrelevant. But in comparison to the greater problems in the world, it does make it *trivial*.

[edited by MattK on 2008-07-20 22:55]

MattK | July 20, 22:43 CET

As others have said, we've spent 800 and odd comments talking about this, I think the "trivial" glasshouse is one I wouldn't want to throw stones in ;).

The article seems like fair comment in as much as it's factually fairly accurate. Whether it's fair comment in the significance it attaches to those facts, I don't know. It's not a body of work, it's one episode so in that sense a small sample and I think the author's also fairly (conveniently) lenient on the depiction of Hammer and Horrible who're both either incompetent or selfish at the very least.

But it's true IMO that Penny as a character is mainly a point in a triangle (it's never stated but I got the distinct impression her signature campaign wasn't doing much until Hammer stepped in

and he only did what he did because Penny was the object of Horrible's affections - and just to be clear, even *he* didn't respect her for the signature thing and she was the love of his life) and it's arguably true that we don't see enough of her as a person separate from Hammer and Horrible.

The way she was played and written she felt true and significant but if you step back, her role was influential in events but not particularly *active* in them.

(one way to read it is as saying the world needed a mix of Penny and Horrible - i.e. her humanity and his slightly more active approach - something which it lost the chance at when she died. So the tragic loss for the world was their partnership and the message is men and women working together are stronger than men or women alone, especially when that means men kicking each other's arses in a juvenile pissing contest)

[edited by Saje on 2008-07-20 22:45]

Saje | July 20, 22:44 CET

I'm Asian, but I don't need to see people who look like me everywhere. I'm more interested in characters who reflect how I feel on the inside.

Also, I'm an atheist, and I'm sort of glad that Joss (fellow atheist) doesn't stick atheist characters into his work who walk around saying, "I'm an atheist who represents atheists everywhere! Look at me!"

As for the rest ... I'm not convinced Penny was wrong, so much as being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hammer was a tool, but she was on the road to convincing him that he could use his power more effectively (like opening homeless shelters). All Dr. Horrible could do was antagonize him, and get beaten up. Which one was the greater force for (positive) change?

Another way one could state things is by saying that Dr. Horrible and Capt Hammer are *overactive*, and their actions cause more harm than good, whereas Penny's subtler approach at least had the potential to help in the long run.

[edited by zoinkers on 2008-07-20 22:51]

zoinkers | July 20, 22:47 CET

theonetruebix - I've been reading various analyses of this sort, and questioning them, and eventually came to the point where I said to myself, "People have lenses." And everybody comes to every point of art that they see with their own lenses. And their lenses

aren't mine, and so I will wonder how they aren't having fun and why they're so concerned with their political cause. But then something will shine through on my lens, and I kind of have to let theirs go a little bit. So, I think we all (and I address this to you because I feel like you asked, a little) will have an easier time of it if we just kind of say, "Oh. That's just the kind of thing they have on their minds as they approach every piece of media ever." The expectations are higher because it's Joss, but they probably treat everything that way, and I doubt there's anything to be done to change it.

daylight said:

And here I was
thinking one of
the cornerstone
principles of
feminism was
that "men are
bad".

I'm half-waiting for people to come in and upbraid you for saying this, and half-afraid that no one will refute this notion. Feminism is a vast and now fragmented movement, and I suspect many, many people who consider themselves feminists would not subscribe to the notion that men are bad. (I'm probably taking you too seriously. You probably meant to be funny. I have a problem.) Joss's brand of feminism mainly purports that women are people, which is a principle I stand behind very firmly. Men are people, but they are people who have historically had privileges women haven't. (And still do, sometimes, but not nearly to the extent they once did.)

Kiba | July 20, 22:52 CET

That's odd. In this one point, I didn't spot any cases of feminism in "Dr. Horrible". Nope, this was pretty straight forward I thought.

Madhatter | July 20, 22:53 CET

Speaking as a female of an underrepresented minority group, I just have to say

This was a piece of entertaining FICTION folks not a dissertation!

I don't think that it's a sin for Joss to depict strong men vs. weak women for a change; I don't think this means that he has fundamentally changed his views on feminism. I for one am glad to see him depict anything original after our long Joss drought. As an artist, I think it would get old after awhile to say the same old thing about girl/women power. I know he is in our corner, great, not everything he produces has to reinforce that statement.

I am also in complete agreement with Zoinkers in that Joss was telling you all about Penny in terms of her humnaitarian beliefs and selflessness; people just weren't listening, or interested (just like in Act I)

mei_mei | July 20, 22:59 CET

You got it on the head, mei_mei.

feliceg | July 20, 23:06 CET

Two things that struck me from reading the articles.

First, yes, Penny was underdeveloped and easily the weakest character in that she never grew in the show. But I also realize that there wasn't time to give everyone an arc, and Captain Hammer didn't change much either. Could she have been written better, especially in the big fight scene? Sure, she could have stood up and rebuffed him only to be ignored during his song, and then walk off, but I submit that Penny dying after standing up to Captain Hammer and/or Dr. Horrible would not have resulted in Dr. Horrible turning evil. More evil. You know. It was his responsibility for the death of perfect idealistic innocence that tipped him over (and her dying belief in Captain Hammer), and had she died after involving herself, after being strong, I don't think that would have happened.

Also not sure why working with the homeless, approaching strangers on the street, or devoting your life to a harsh and thankless cause is the work of a weak person. We didn't see her take charge or kick ass, and I guess that's the only strength that matters.

Second - few people of color. Granted, and one or more of the groupies, the mayor, or a newscaster might have been good. But, as said previously, he mostly used his friends so he had a limited pool to draw from.

But I submit that had he chosen a person of color to be any of his main characters he would have received even more backlash. The bad guy who goes eviler, triumphing because of a dead girl? The bombastic good guy? The naive girl that gets senselessly killed? Any of those choices, were they of color, would also have been criticized as being insensitive.

C. A. Bridges | July 20, 23:08 CET

I want to add that I was initially in agreement with people who thought of Penny as a weak and underdeveloped character until I began to wonder if Joss wasn't baiting us a little, intentionally soft-pedaling her humanitarian efforts so that we initially walk right past her message like the people on the street who ignored her

petition. We can't all be superheroes/villains - some of us have to settle for making small contributions to the world, and accepting that real change can take a long time.

zoinkers | July 20, 23:09 CET

And here I was thinking one of the cornerstone principles of feminism was that "men are bad".

That was one of the cornerstone principles of a small but very vocal subsection of feminists, theet ones that ultimately contributed to the entire movement getting the man-hating label. I firmly believe that Andrea Dworkin set the feminist movement back 20 years.

[edited by C. A. Bridges on 2008-07-20 23:12]

C. A. Bridges | July 20, 23:11 CET

Any of those choices, were they of color, would also have been criticized as being insensitive.

Like I said, agenda analysis tends to be a pointless game. And like the great philosopher WOPR once said, the only winning move is not to play.

theonetruebix | July 20, 23:13 CET

Or we could try to teach them noughts and crosses, that also works.

Saje | July 20, 23:15 CET

Let's not forget that Maurissa Tancharoen is Asian, and played one of the groupies. Also, she was a co-writer, and is now on the staff of Dollhouse. Under-represented minorities is a systemic, self-propagating problem that results in fewer minority actors being able to make a living, and thus fewer available for casting calls for those well-intentioned enough to make an effort to cast more (that's my guess, anyway ... I'm not in the industry).

zoinkers | July 20, 23:16 CET

My god what a load of...

No, there was nothing to do with feminism in the show. So?

How can anybody say Penny was the least developed of the three?

Do we know anything about Captain Hammer? He isn't developed, he's just strong.

As for Penny, she was plenty developed. Well as much as a not center character of a 40 minute show can be. Sure she was the one naïve, but that's not a bad thing. She was the good one. All three

characters were on a mission to help. Captain Hammer helped the "Man", but thanks to Penny realized he can do more. Dr. Horrible wanted to rule the world with violence. Both of them had gifts (strength, and probably very intelligent), but she tried to do something for good even though she herself had problems, she didn't have a gift and people ignored her as she tried to get their attention.

Penny dying at the end isn't because she is a woman, it happened in order to develop Dr. Horrible's character. This story was about a man and a woman but obviously centered on the man (the show was named after him) so he was the one that should have gotten more developed. In a similar story if the focus was on the woman than the man's death would help develop her story (like Buffy and Angel at the end of season 2 or Buffy and Spike at the end of season 7 or Serenity). Is that OK? Both stories are good. Maybe there aren't enough stories where the woman is the one that survives and developed, but that's not Joss's fault.

urkonn | July 20, 23:21 CET

Let's not forget that Maurissa Tancharoen is Asian, and played one of the groupies. Also, she was a co-writer...

Under agenda analysis, this just means she's been co-opted by the masculine hegemonic power structure of the male-dominated entertainment industry, and now is part of the problem rather than the solution. Clearly, she simply isn't feminist enough.

theonetruebix | July 20, 23:23 CET

Penny wasn't weak. She wasn't the hero, but she wasn't weak. I was far more irritated with Pepper Potts being entirely competent one minute and the next being all "OMG won't someone help me, I can't possibly touch the goo!" (I've been told I'm insane in this belief, so no need pointing it out again.)

AuntArlene | July 20, 23:28 CET

Oh for goodness sake! Sometimes a hammer is just a hammer, people! (I'm not *really* that insensitive, but I do tend to think that we can overanalyze something entertaining and delightful to the point of it being neither anymore. This might be a case of that)

OzLady | July 20, 23:35 CET

and it's
extremely
dismissive and
insulting to imply

that anyone who
takes a spare few
minutes out of
their day to point
out some
feminist issue

Not really. Doesn't matter to me if the writer was criticising Joss on a feminist or a socialist or a neo-con or a religious platform. I just see articles like these as a sign of the times. Attack the safe stuff, ignore the big targets. It's representative of our culture.

Though I will let you all into a little secret. The most widely viewed article to date at Whedonesque is Joss' post about Dua Khalil. More people have read that than any other post here. So I think people are concerned about the big issues, it's just that not enough people seem to be writing about them.

Simon | July 20, 23:37 CET

I think she *was* the hero. She was proactive in trying to open a new shelter as well as running the current one. No one was paying attention to her, but that doesn't mean her efforts don't mean anything. Actually, one person did listen to her. Regardless of his reasons, Captain Hammer "championed" the cause because of her. So she did make a difference. I also think she was growing, if slowly, throughout the 40 minutes. Until her life was tragically cut short, but that can't be held against her. I have no complaints about her character, except wishing I could see more of her. Not every woman is Joss' creations will or should have superpowers. Doesn't make them weak or pointless.

hacksaway | July 20, 23:40 CET

Alright, just to get it out of the way, yes, I am a heterosexual, white male. But since I firmly believe that all people are equal, regardless of gender, race or sexual orientation, I also feel secure in calling bullshit when needed in cases like these every once in a while without feeling like a complete bigot.

First of all: I've always found the 'her/his death was only to serve the plot' argument to be somewhat specious. *Everything* in a piece of fiction, including its characters, are tools to make the recipient of the piece feel something. If it's done well, we might feel like the characters have lives of their own, hell, the writers themselves might even feel that, but when it comes down to it, they're means to an end. Is the death of Bruce Wayne's (hey, topical!) parents, the sole function of which is arguably to transform him into Batman, a hideous misuse of parental figures in fiction?

I don't see Penny as any less developed than Horrible or Hammer. (Well, maybe less than Horrible. He's the protagonist, after all.) As far as I can see, the problem some people have is that innocence apparently isn't a worthwhile character trait. Or at least, that innocence in a female character automatically constitutes a stereotype, by default claiming that 'Penny is sweet and innocent and simple, therefore all women are sweet and innocent and simple'.

I'm not saying that there isn't discussions to be had about gender and race in fiction, but I think it's unfair to force a female character in what is pretty much a three person play to be a representation of the entire female gender.

Winther | July 20, 23:53 CET

I agree with what several have said. It seems rather anti-feminist to me to ignore that Penny was actually the only one, at the start, who was proactively choosing her own path. She was working for a cause she was passionate about. She'd come from a troubled background & was trying to find hope in a bleak world. What was Captain Hammer doing? Nothing he ever really thought about - he'd never even experienced pain. Doctor Horrible/Billy couldn't even tell a girl in a laundromat he liked her hair. And there's Penny, out on the street, asking uncaring strangers to try to help her open a new homeless shelter. She's the only one truly fighting for change. And to say she's weak - to me that's actually perpetuating the lie that in order to be strong we have to kill off all the femininity, kill off all the softness. That the only strength to be recognized is physical strength, anger, aggressiveness - masculine (note - "masculine", not "male") characteristics.

Yes, she is flawed. She had, as many have said, chosen to see the good only - at the expense of being blind to the evil. But I certainly can't call her undeveloped - not when her death ripped out my heart, tore it to shreds, then set those shreds on fire. The piece may not have worked for the analyst here, she may not have been touched by Penny's character, but I don't think that means the intention of the writers of Dr. Horrible were that Penny be a one-dimensional object.

kalia | July 20, 23:54 CET

To be honest, I doubt if we would even be having this discussion if Penny wasn't killed.

That death turned what was an amusing and unique little event with catchy music and a fantastic performance by NPH into a mood-killing, angsty downer.

I loved the first two acts, despised the third other than Dr. H's song

while Captain Hammer was frozen. The third act crashed into a black hole for me so I guess it was bound to foul up some moods.

Penny saying that "Captain Hammer will save us" with her dying breath demeaned her character in my eyes. It was even worse than her actual death. I mean she's not a complete idiot is she? I don't know, maybe people just get stupid when they are bleeding from the chest.

[edited by Xane on 2008-07-20 23:58]

Xane | July 20, 23:55 CET

For some, the perfect is the enemy of both the good and the evil, and they can never, ever, be satisfied. Just walk away from them, you have enough other, better, things to do with your life.

Penny was well-enough written that her death has broken hearts. What more do you need?

htom | July 21, 00:00 CET

Yes, I do honestly believe that line was a result of her being on the verge of death. In reality, people don't have meaningful dying words. So she forgot what just happened in the last few minutes after being **stabbed** and dying, that doesn't demean her character. If she had survived, I highly doubt she would still have been "yay Captain Hammer!" But she was already lost at that point.

hacksaway | July 21, 00:05 CET

I am not a proponent of agenda based analysis but some of the comments indicating that the issue was trivial or unimportant started to wake up my fairness gene. Why is it trivial for feminists to pay attention to how women are portrayed in popular media? To be blunt, trivializing feminist concerns is the traditional manner to attack women trying to change things and make them shut up. I really hope people don't jump on that bandwagon, but argue their dislike of the argument on a different basis...as most have.

newcj | July 21, 00:05 CET

It makes me sad that feminists would dismiss Penny as weak. While she wasn't the focus of the story, I would say that she was more developed than Captain Hammer. In fact, we might even know more about her than we do Billy. We know that Dr Horrible wants cash, fame, and social change (possible in that order). We only see him achieving two of those. Penny's signature gathering might not be overly effective, but we do know that she spent time with the homeless, giving them food, shelter, and hope. Captain Hammer

fought some bad guys, but he didn't really care about society.

I'm also bothered by people criticizing her for having sex with Hammer, or saying that her death was a punishment because of it. So someone isn't a real woman because they make a bad choice about sex? Sure, she didn't confront him in the middle of the homeless shelter ceremony, but I'm fairly confident in saying that she wouldn't have slept with him a second time.

Yes, she died, and yes, her death was a catalyst for change, but to say that death was her only purpose is both anti-feminist and anti-humanist.

Of course, I'm sure that I've watched Dr Horrible more than the reviewers and it just might be my favorite piece of fiction ever.

theclynn | July 21, 00:15 CET

I think the "Captain Hammer will save us" line was more a dramatic choice for the effect it would have on Dr. Horrible.

Zoinkers and other have mentioned what I imagine is the most feminist aspect of Penny's character. While Dr. Horrible talks about "Social Change," he mostly just robs banks and attacks bridges and build weapons. Captain Hammer claims to want to help humanity, but he is mostly just a misogynistic jackass who isn't even that good at being a hero.

Penny does the hard job, walking the streets to collect signatures and trying to help people who need it. She's the grassroots worker, the person who cares enough to start with herself.

Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer are boys playing with toys and fighting over power and girls. Penny actually gives a damn. That's the feminist message.

That'd being said, this movie was frakking fantastic.

White Tiger | July 21, 00:17 CET

The argument is flawed, not the feminism. Although, bix's points above about some folk not being able to enjoy anything is absolutely true. I definitely see some folks in some places who almost gleefully talk about how feminist Joss isn't. It makes me a little ill, really.

TamaraC | July 21, 00:18 CET

There was no major Italian transvestite character in this. What's up with that, Joss? Why you hatin'?

Paranoia is fun.

[edited by JadeHand on 2008-07-21 02:30]

JadeHand | July 21, 00:19 CET

I have to agree with newcj.

lycoming | July 21, 00:22 CET

newcj;

I can't speak for anyone else here, but my problem with this discussion is, as I wrote above, that Penny has to shoulder the burden of representing "how women are portrayed in popular media". It strikes me that she's actually very similar to Kaylee, who was also sweet and kind, and tried to see the best in everyone. Yes, she exhibited other sides as well, but given the fact that she had many more hours of screentime than Penny, let's leave that for the minute. This begs the question, why was *that* character okay, much loved, even? Is it only okay to have female character that might be perceived as weak or simple by some (which doesn't include me, by the way) if you make sure to have other, strong female characters in the story too? So everyone can see that, 'no, we don't think ALL, or even most, women are like that.'? That shouldn't be necessary, should it?

Winther | July 21, 00:26 CET

I think there's every indication that Penny would've continued to work for the homeless even without Hammer's help. The more I think about the whole thing, the more it seems Joss was aware of the discussion this could provoke, and intentionally designed Penny to be someone apparently weak, but in effect more dedicated to social change than either Hammer or Horrible.

[edited by zoinkers on 2008-07-21 00:31]

zoinkers | July 21, 00:28 CET

It makes me sad that feminists would dismiss Penny as weak

Some feminists, please. Attacking the general for the faults of the specific is one of the problems here.

C. A. Bridges | July 21, 00:29 CET

theclynn said:

I'm also bothered
by people

criticizing her for
having sex with
Hammer, or
saying that her
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didn't confront
him in the middle
of the homeless
shelter
ceremony, but
I'm fairly
confident in
saying that she
wouldn't have
slept with him a
second time.

I don't think that was the criticism. I think the critic's argument was that she should be able to have sex with whomever she pleases, and also not be so embarrassed when Hammer mentions it. (While I agree that she's a grown up and gets to make her own choices, I can sympathize with her slinking off the stage there. Because maybe for her that's not everybody's business. I know it wouldn't be for me.)

Kiba | July 21, 00:32 CET

Some feminists,
please. Attacking
the general for
the faults of the
specific is one of
the problems
here..

My statement wasn't meant to be a general all feminists. I consider myself a feminist. Maybe I should have used "when" instead of "that". For example, I feel sad when kittens are sick. I mean that I feel sad when every kitten is sick, not just for some of the sick kittens. In this way, I am sad about every feminist that dismisses Penny as weak. So, it makes me sad when feminists dismiss Penny as weak, or that any feminist would.

theclynn | July 21, 00:41 CET

Went back to see the comments at Hathor Legacy and saw this:

"This article is now on the front page of Whedonesque, so a quick note to anyone clicking over from there:
Welcome! We're a site that discusses how TV and film portray women characters. Just so you know, we do not hate Joss Whedon. In fact we have a number of favorable reviews of his other projects:"

with a list of pro-Whedon character articles. General consensus is still against the depiction of Penny's character but it's not unanimous. And the other articles pick up on many of the reasons I love Joss' writing. So, this one didn't work for them. Fair enough.

C. A. Bridges | July 21, 00:49 CET

The Ani DiFranco quote applies here:

people talk
about my image
like i come in two
dimensions
like lipstick is a
sign of my
declining mind
like what i
happen to be
wearing
the day that
someone takes a
picture
is my new
statement for all
of womankind

Basically, even if you accept the writer's view of Penny, which I don't share, not every piece of art by a feminist writer is going to be gonzo feminism. Not every piece by every person is representative of their every opinion on everything.

zeitgeist | July 21, 00:59 CET

"And here I was thinking one of the cornerstone principles of feminism was that "men are bad". "

It's appalling that you think this is what feminism is about. Feminism is about equality, not man-hating, and if you don't know

that, please go read Equality Now's website and educate yourself.
This is not said in anger, this is sincere.

library hooligan | July 21, 01:01 CET

Edit - That'll teach me to skim ;)

zeitgeist | July 21, 01:04 CET

b!x didn't post the original quote, daylight did. Although I took it as sarcastic.

And, to be fair, there *are* plenty of self-identified feminists who espouse just such beliefs. It's not what I think feminism means, nor is it what the founders intended for it, but every group has its vocal idiots who confuse the message and hurt their cause more than help.

C. A. Bridges | July 21, 01:08 CET

newcj:

Why is it trivial
for feminists to
pay attention to
how women are
portrayed in
popular media?

I chose the word trivial very carefully. It is exactly that, criticism of this sort of thing is completely trivial when compared to the far greater injustices happening in the world, the greatest of which are rape, FGM, and the cultures that largely accept and, sometimes, encourage them -- this is no more strongly seen than in the case of "honour" killings. This is the very real injustice facing women in the world, and this is what we should be talking about, not prattling around about this.

As I said in my previous comment, that's not to say this discussion is not relevant. Because media portrayal of women does have an impact on what people think. But as I type this, those *other things* are happening right now, out there, and that's why I referred to this dissection of the media as trivial.

ETA: This is just my opinion. I feel the need to state this, because I don't want to get into any argument over it, I'm just going to leave this post to speak for itself -- I think there might be some people here who think it's inappropriate to bring the wider world into this discussion, but I think people avoid talking about these things too much.

ETA2: I wasn't going to do this (sorry), but I would like to clarify some more... What I'm referring to as trivial is the dissection and the analysis and the discussion about this *in particular*. Fine for an essay, not so much for feelings of disapproval. Applying this criticism to the wider industry though is something that's not as trivial, and as I said in an earlier post, I'm very sympathetic towards this.

[edited by MattK on 2008-07-21 01:38]

MattK | July 21, 01:13 CET

If you read the comments over there, they are mixed as well. One person points out that Joss does not only kill the sweet optimistic women - he does it to the men too - Wash anyone? And the reviewer was taken to task for what is also noted above: a quiet personality is nevertheless a personality. Not just a 2D character to be fought over. I think I said it after Act I - Penny is a bigger hero than the other 2.

Lioness | July 21, 01:18 CET

I thought she was as developed as any secondary character in a 45 minute movie could possibly be. We got a pretty clear understanding of how she viewed the world and what she was most passionate about. We actually know more about her past (lots of bad luck with both jobs and relationships) than any of the other characters, including Dr. Horrible himself.

I'd say they were just expecting too much. Not every story Joss does has to have feminism as the main theme all the time.

RaisedByMongrels | July 21, 01:41 CET

moley75 said:

"what made me interested in Dr Horrible was the idea that Joss was focusing on a non-supernaturally-gifted MALE"

Wasn't Mal Reynolds one of those?

Firefly ain't a character name, and Mal wasn't the main focus. ;)

Braeden Fireheart | July 21, 01:56 CET

I have to say- Penny is the only character in "Dr. Horrible" whom I'd actually like to *be* (and not in a cosplay *watch OzLady use her new vocabulary!* way). She's idealistic and a little naive, sure, but you can see that she is able to see things as they really are when she needs to and her primary focus is on trying to actually DO something to make the world a better place. If that doesn't make her a role model (for feminists and others ;-), I don't know what does.

OzLady | July 21, 01:59 CET

I agree, I admire Penny's ability to see the good even in a total jackass like Captain Hammer. It's hard! She's also optimistic, and I don't think she's all that naive - she believes things can get better, but she acknowledges the troubles of the world in her efforts to alleviate them.

zoinkers | July 21, 02:10 CET

"There was no major Italian transvestite character is this. What's up with that, Joss? Why you hatin'?"

Heh....You see I am with those that are jaded by these kind of articles. Why does *every* story have to have a strong female character. Not all women are strong you know..the same applies for men before anyone jumps down my throat!!

Penny was strong in her own way, but it's a moot point.This was Dr Horribles story. Neither Captain Hammer nor Penny were totally fleshed out characters- and while they played an important role, the story was about how Billy became the supervillian Dr Horrible (for real). It was a supervillian origin story. And it was brilliant. So ya....Penny died to advance Billy's story. It's a very valid story telling method- and as someone brought up further up the thread - if it was a man dying to advance a womans story would that be fine?

Equality?

And yes I know that for hundreds of years women in fiction were painted as weak and needing a strong man to 'save them'. And I can imagine how that would become tiring for the female gender and they should have strong well developed kick ass females to look up to. But not every story has to have that.

This story didnt need that.

Let men have their stories where they can be strong and the woman can be weak and needs saving etc too ok?

angeliclestat | July 21, 02:24 CET

I find this article vastly irritating. I'm a fervent feminist who is in academia so I'm probably what would be considered a good audience for this sort of piece. Well, not so much. It's about as subtle as a jackhammer and about as appealing to my metaphorical "ears."

In my opinion, Penny was marvelously strong. Yes, in a quiet way. She was also not a perfect character - she was initially fooled by Dr. Hammer. Or was she, really? I like imperfect characters. I like quiet characters. Doesn't mean they aren't strong. Why must strength be defined in a certain way? Arggh. I don't fancy spilling any more electronic ink over this. I'm done with it. Carry on, those who are engaged in articulately and passionately arguing both (or more than two?) sides of this issue.

[edited by phlebotinin on 2008-07-21 02:27]

phlebotinin | July 21, 02:27 CET

Simon said:

Dear people take
pop culture way
too seriously,

Instead of
focusing on easy
targets, take a
look at difficult
issues. Have a
look at the role of
the woman in
third world
countries, debate
about whether
religion and the
modern woman
can co-exist and
wonder if there's
too many women
in prisons. You
know serious
issues like that.
Wasting time on
whether a
character who
had twenty
minutes screen
time should have

been killed off is
not what your
foremothers
fought for.

My initial reaction to reading this was, "well, **my** foremothers fought for my right to tell guys who make patronizing comments like this to fuck off." But that wouldn't be very diplomatic, so I'll instead thank you for your perspective on feminism, Simon. Do tell me, what else did my feminist foremothers fight for? And more precisely, what else is appropriate for me, as a feminist, to express an opinion on? If I show you my internet logs demonstrating the embarrassingly enormous amount of time I spend on feminist blogs and newssources educating myself on issues like the prevalence fo sexual assault of female soldiers within the ranks of the US military or the fact that having a cesarean section is now commonly used as the basis for denying women health insurance, will I then have earned the right to comment on things as "trivial" as patterns of representation of women in pop culture?

Moreover, a common theme on this website is to laud Joss for his unabashed feminism. But praise devoid of honest reflection (and on occasion, even criticism) is nothing more than the pathetic celebrity-hero worship that Joss himself is satirizing in Dr. Horrible.

BrewBunny | July 21, 02:34 CET

I realize this is a touchy topic and bound to inspire high feelings on all sides. Hiding a "fuck off" behind an "I might've said" is still a "fuck off" and that doesn't happen here, no matter who you are talking to. You're on time out **BrewBunny**. My forebears fought for the right for me to say and do what I choose, whether its confront larger issues or endlessly dissect minutiae, though I suspect they would be more proud if I did it without over use of expletives in place of a reasoned response.

zeitgeist | July 21, 02:56 CET

BrewBunny:

will I then have
earned the right
to comment on
things as "trivial"
as patterns of
representation of
women in pop
culture?

Nobody, for one second, was saying you didn't have the right to talk about whatever you want to. Including telling us to fuck off, should you wish. Furthermore, I think it's fairly clear in an historical sense what your foremothers fought for. The right to vote, for example (in my country at least). I think that might be what Simon had in mind when he made that comment, though I wouldn't want to put words into his mouth.

Secondly, I still defend the use of the word "trivial" -- I refer you to my above comment on that. The word trivial is very well defined, and I think appropriate for that usage.

On a personal note, I'd like to say that although recently I have been nothing but praise for the Whedons and Maurissa for creating in Dr. Horrible, that's because it's deserved nothing but praise. I have had issues with some of Joss' work in the past, as is expected when his body of work encompasses so much, but I think a lot of people here might have similar views. Just because we're not talking about them now doesn't mean that we're complicit in some hero-worship.

This isn't really the right venue to discuss this... but I find it interesting that you raised the point about female soldiers within the US military. I too find it alarming, but at least the military has a series of checks and balances and processes that can hopefully lead those guilty to justice. What I'm more concerned about though is, for example, the sexual assaults on women employed by Halliburton in Iraq. Many of them were ashamed of what had happened, and when they reported the crimes to their employers it was all hushed up, and not having faith in the Iraqi police system nothing was done. Thankfully, some progress is being made on this (there were some people speaking before Congress recently, if I remember rightly), but it still is very worrying.

ETA: Err, my opening sentence has suddenly become rather ironic in light of zeitgeist's post, but in case it wasn't clear, the "right" I was talking about was in the free speech sense, not in the insult-the-mods sense.

[edited by MattK on 2008-07-21 03:04]

MattK | July 21, 03:02 CET

You guys are reading too deep into Joss Whedon's ocean.

This is Joss poking fun at traditional gender roles in musicals and at traditional musicals in general. How could you miss that? Perhaps you are reasonably unfamiliar with musicals!!! (This is the main reason people are complaining about the ending and Penny dying. They don't know musical theatre.)

Penny is the overly do-gooder sweet girly girl. She's even dressed

like she's from the 1900s.
Hammer is the overly masculine male super hero.
Horrible is the typical male nerd with feminine sensitive qualities.

He's poking fun!! You have completely missed the point. Come on
Joss Whedon's fans are more intelligent than this.

Every part of Dr. Horrible's Sing Along Blog was all about the classics, the whole thing is like a classic musical tradegy albeit tongue-in-cheek. That's why the gender roles stand as is and that's why someone dies.

Why do we have to bend gender roles for something to be ok? How is it right to criticise people for fitting their gender roles too closely. We criticise for the opposite too. No one can win.

Hee | July 21, 03:02 CET

What a load of crap. Can't say I'm surprised. For a rare time Joss writes a piece that isn't about female empowerment and he gets skewered for it.

Besides which, you can read "Dr. Horrible" as a story about how, when men get wrapped up in their idiotic conflicts with one another and begin treating women like possessions rather than independent people, it's those women who pay the price.

This article was essentially the highfalutin' equivalent of a cheap shot. Boo.

[edited by jsnell on 2008-07-21 03:10]

jsnell | July 21, 03:09 CET

I'll argue directly with the use of the word "trivia" to characterize the analysis of the depiction of women in cultural productions like Dr. Horrible's.

Those depictions are symptoms (and causes) of ideological attitudes about women. They reveal (and cause) the kinds of things that we all hate about the treatment of women (in both the third world and the first). To suggest that we should just leave them alone, or ignore them, or not bother thinking too much bout them because there are bigger or more immediate problems facing women is to ignore how connected these phenomena are to each other.

All of that being said, intelligent feminist critique is more than just counting "strong" female characters. One thing that many of the critiques leveled at Dr. Horrible's seem to miss is that it is clearly a comic send-up, a parody, of the superhero genre. Dr. Horrible and Capt. Hammer are parodic versions of supervillain and superhero

masculinity (though one version is clearly more lovingly presented). The whole point is to show that the traditionally lauded superhero character is a masculinist fantasy, while showing that the traditionally-reviled supervillain character could turn out to be an actually sympathetic, sensitive figure. Penny is the only realistically admirable character in the show; it's a result of the genre conventions (which are being parodied) that puts her into the role of helpless victim. (She could, of course, have defied that role a little more, but if you stray too far from the genre roles, you start to lose the parody and you suddenly are not really doing a send-up of superhero stories at all.)

ETA: yeah, what Hee said.

[edited by Septimus on 2008-07-21 03:15]

Septimus | July 21, 03:13 CET

How could you
miss that?
Perhaps you are
reasonably
unfamiliar with
musicals!!!

Uh, guilty? Could you tell me what you're talking about, please? Are you saying he subverted the traditional roles or that he parodied them by making them overblown?

RaisedByMongrels | July 21, 03:16 CET

Well, I have to say, "reading too deep" may be thought of as something that intelligent fans do . . . although I wouldn't flatter myself to think that somehow JW fans are more intelligent than other kinds. Better taste, perhaps. ;-)

But let's not descend to just slinging mud. There are valid points to be made here from all perspectives - as, indeed, many of you have been making. I do think the use of the word "trivial" is a leetle problematic.

SoddingNancyTribe | July 21, 03:17 CET

What **Septimus** and **Hee** said re: superhero parody and amusingly I was just discussing the use of the word trivial and whether these cultural patterns can be said to be a symptom/cause of the larger issues. See? When you waste time instant messaging, other people get to post your thoughts on the Black ;)

zeitgeist | July 21, 03:21 CET

I do believe that Joss has secretly hated women this whole time and has only just now let it slip. That bastard!

randomfire | July 21, 03:29 CET

Come on people, not EVERYTHING the man does have to be about feminist values. He didn't have even the normal 42 minutes of your basic 1 hour drama to introduce several character and a whole new setting and a concept that is very much off the beaten path. Guess what, sometimes the chick actually IS a blue eyed dreamer without too big hidden depths and complications. Not all females fights evil and kicks its booty. Who knew? And also, she atleast had enough personality to make me scream out when she died. Guess she wasn't so bland and colorless after all.

Nah, that article basically screams "Waah! Waah! I woke up cranky and needed to vent somewhere.". Makes the person in question appear petty and whiny and ridiculous. Which honestly wouldn't be a problem if it weren't for the fact that what the person in question advocates also gets that same shimmer of ridiculousness. It's like the "controversy" surrounding the Frog Princess. It's like "if that's all they're complaining about then I guess there really aren't any more problems here cause their argument is laughable". It actually pushed back progress quite a few steps and I just find it daft and frustrating. There are really issues to deal with about, yet when people bother about things like this it seems like there aren't. Which in turn creates a even bigger problem because people can't fix a problem they're not even aware off.

Also, this was "Dr Horrible's Sing-A-Long Blog". Had this been "Penny's Sing-A-Long blog" this show would have been completely different and she'd be much more fleshed out. But since this was Dr Horrible's story Captain Hammer played the role of the nemesis and Penny the role of the object of his desire. If you can't understand what this means for the story... Well, then I guess you're not very bright.

EDIT: And why does those classically female characteristics have to always be classified as something bad? Personally, most "female character trait" are those that I respect and admire, while most classically male traits I'm not really loving. Sure, the fact that I kinda have a problem with a considerable chunk of my own gender and generally prefer to socialize with female have something to do with it, but why can't it be a good thing to be pure and sweet and good and optimistic and a big squishy softie. I'm a big squishy softie to and I would never wanna change that. Rather be a softie then hard and unfeeling. Why does a female have to have "male" trait in order to be validated, is someone implying that "male" traits are somehow better? Sorry, that article made me angry and when I'm angry I can't think straight. Hope this was atleast somewhat

coherent.

[edited by Djungelurban on 2008-07-21 03:50]

Djungelurban | July 21, 03:37 CET

And, as I just said, we don't have to descend to mud-slinging to make points - calling the author "petty and whiny and ridiculous" (and "not very bright") doesn't advance your argument one bit. And is against our house rules to boot. No more personalized comments, please.

SoddingNancyTribe | July 21, 03:42 CET

Sorry, I just find these articles absolutely ridiculous, and find it kind of impossible to take them seriously.

Aren't people allowed to be people instead of being grand statements about their gender? That is short-sighted, narrow-minded, and you know, kind of ignorant.

This is the exact same reason that the one essay in *Finding Serenity* annoyed me to no end (and why I was in love with the essay in *Serenity Found* which totally rebuked it).

UnpluggedCrazy | July 21, 03:44 CET

Taken from second-linked article:

Conclusion: if
only she'd had
sex with Dr.
Horrible instead,
everything would
have been fine!
I'm sure she
could have been
his sexy
supervillainous
Number Two
character.

I definitely disagree with this. It's not about the sex between Captain Hammer or Dr. Horrible; it's the relationship that was building between Penny & Billy. As discussed on the ever-so-long thread, Dr. Horrible is seen as Billy's alter-ego. Penny keeps him grounded as Billy, reminds him that there are other ways to change the world besides cutting the head off of the fish.

As mentioned by everyone, Penny is strong and quiet. I would say she is more realistic than either CH & DH, which wouldn't make her naive in any way. Billy talks about doing a major over-haul and putting the power into someone else's hands... and yet, that is where his idea stops. He doesn't have any idea of what the big picture will look like, only the desire to get to that point. CH, too, doesn't see the big picture in his "bash in heads"; he lives for the moment. Penny even addresses this to him: "Thank you, Hammerman. I don't think I can explain how important it was that you stopped the van." Which, he brushes off and jumps into the "Man's Gotta Do" song (which Dr. H also sings).

Also not sure
why working with
the homeless,
approaching
strangers on the
street, or
devoting your life
to a harsh and
thankless cause
is the work of a
weak person. We
didn't see her
take charge or
kick ass, and I
guess that's the
only strength
that matters.

C. A. Bridges |
July 20, 23:08
CET

I also agree with this. Strength isn't only reflected in the physical sense. If anything, Penny has the strength to *continue* to create awareness (like Equality Now) when no one will listen. I'd also like to add that I don't believe she was completely naive about CH. There was the cheese, and under speech... but AFTER they had sex, she didn't still have "yay, CH!" idea... more of "eh". And, add the strength to put up with a guy who humiliates you for the greater cause. I think she shows strength in retaining her emotions at his speech. The dedication was for the homeless, not for Penny. And she understood that.

I want to add
that I was
initially in
agreement with
people who

thought of Penny
as a weak and
underdeveloped
character until I
began to wonder
if Joss wasn't
baiting us a little,
intentionally
soft-pedaling her
humanitarian
efforts so that we
initially walk right
past her message
like the people on
the street who
ignored her
petition. We can't
all be
superheroes/villains
- some of us
have to settle for
making small
contributions to
the world, and
accepting that
real change can
take a long time.

zoinkers | July
20, 23:09 CET

I noticed this too, **zoinkers**. I also agree with your other posts. There are many layers to this story, and to fully explore them all requires more than one viewing. I mean, I think I've seen it as a whole 20 times and I didn't think of the similarities with Macbeth until today. These devices serve more than one purpose.

I can't tell how many times the authors of the article watched Dr. Horrible, but I would suggest to anyone who thinks about posting to really reflect and discuss a topic before posting your two cents. Why deliver a narrow view of the argument that can be dismantled and discarded for its flaws when there can be fuller discussion on the topic?

korkster | July 21, 03:47 CET

I went in to comment on this, and then people already said it for me, so I'll start with quoting **kalia**

She's the only

one truly fighting
for change. And
to say she's weak
- to me that's
actually
perpetuating the
lie that in order
to be strong we
have to kill off all
the femininity,
kill off all the
softness. That
the only strength
to be recognized
is physical
strength, anger,
aggressiveness -
masculine (note -
"masculine", not
"male")
characteristics.

I think that's the nail-on-its-head. It makes me sad to think that self-proclaimed feminists would miss this important point. Not only is Penny the strongest character in this piece of fiction - in the non-traditional, unmuscular way - she's also the only one who is actually *doing the right thing*. She gets results in a real, constructive fashion, where others only perpetuate the problems at hand. If Billy had been a little bit more like Penny, than none of the resulting darkness would have happened. So I'm very much with kalia and **phlebotinin** and others arguing the point that - while the linked article does not say anything factually untrue, it *does* miss the point.

I do also agree with others that not every piece of fiction can be about everything a writer believes in all the time. Joss believes in equality, so sometimes his female characters will be just as flawed or inconsequential as his male characters (and - again - I'm not agreeing that Penny, in this case, falls into that category). That does not, however, negate the fact the he *also* writes strong, female protagonists who we *don't* get to see in the mainstream media too often. This makes feminism a prevasive part of his fiction. But that doesn't mean it's the *only* part or that to be a feminist means to *only* write strong female characters (be it in either the traditional or untraditional sense).

Despite all of that, and depsite the fact that I agree with **Bix** that agenda analasys of fiction gives tainted results, I do not feel that it is *pointless* to adress issues of inequality in popular media or that anyone commenting on this as part of an issue should be looking at graver things instead. That is an argument that goes nowhere, as it can be applied to pretty much anything or any issue. I especially don't think that we - as a group - should condemn people taking

time to dissect fiction, as that's what we're doing here all the time. And even *tainted* results can teach us something about the landscape of fiction as it stands today.

I, however, *do* take issue with the implied notion in the linked article that inequality in the way genders are portrayed in fiction means that we should 'flip the sign' of the inequality and continuously portray women as 'strong'. Sometimes women *are* weak, same as men, and when author's who based on the body of their work are pointedly egalitarian in their portrayal of gender, I do not think that attacking them on showing a differing character (which again, I do not feel Penny is) is at all fair.

Also: yikes, this thread is growing! Sorry if I'm doubling points made after I starting writing this :).

GVH | July 21, 03:55 CET

SoddingNancyTribe:

I'd like to argue that I didn't actually call the person "petty and whiny and ridiculous", just that the impression you get from the article. Might be right, might be wrong, I don't know who wrote it and I don't care to know. I'm just saying, if you wear a jester's hat, you're gonna look like a jester and people will think you're a jester, even if you're not really. And I needed to make that clear in order to explain why it was hurting the cause. It was hurting the cause BECAUSE it appeared ridiculous.

The "not too bright" however... Yeah sure, maybe a bit unnecessary but I didn't really aim that at anyone specific. If someone takes offense to that, I guess that someone then has some serious self-esteem issues...

[edited by Djungelurban on 2008-07-21 04:03]

Djungelurban | July 21, 04:01 CET

Yes, it's best not to argue. If you want to discuss it further, please take it to e-mail. Otherwise, let's focus on the substance, as both **korkster** and **GVH** do to good effect immediately above.

SoddingNancyTribe | July 21, 04:09 CET

GVH, it seems that as our long thread is coming to a close (which I hope doesn't because I posted more questions there), this one will continue to grow. Balancing the scales, and all of that. It's still all Horrible though, which makes me happy.

korkster | July 21, 04:09 CET

Thanks, **SNT**. Do I get a gold star? How about a cookie? :)

korkster | July 21, 04:10 CET

Can we take a step back here people? And maybe listen to how we are talking to each other?

Isn't analyzing Joss' shows what this website is all about? Doesn't it usually go like this? You (poster A) make a point, I (poster B) agree or disagree without telling you that you are completely wrong? I don't throw around terms like agenda analysis and bias - I may instead say, well - in my reading of it - I didn't see that. Telling people they are overanalyzing seems rather dismissive and rude to me. What happened to that website I used to visit that used to interact in a more polite, constructive way?

zeitgeist, I see you banned someone for using a nasty word but to me, there are some nastier attitudes being displayed here. I am kind of suprised and disappointed at how quickly it got ugly. Melisande and newej - I'm right with you on what you posted.

ruthless1 | July 21, 04:13 CET

ruthless1 - there are indeed nasty attitudes aplenty here and many of them have been warned. There is heated discussion and there is over the line. If you have questions or feel that we missed someone else who rated a time out, feel free to email. Polite and constructive is what we're trying to enforce.

zeitgeist | July 21, 04:25 CET

*throws fuel at the fire

Two thirds of the Evil League of Evil were female as Dr. Horrible joined. Clearly Joss thinks women are more evil than men, I mean.... Clearly.

Sorry.

Really, you think women or people of color are mistreated, stereotyped or underused in the media? Consider just for a second the history and the stereotyping/underuse of strong successful Native Americans. As a descendant of the Cherokee Nation I could go on and on, but I won't.

If Joss were required to have strong, independent, successful characters from every possible walk of life in every 40 minutes of media that had his name on it, we'd miss out on a lot of great entertainment. Requiring someone to challenge/defy every stereotype that one feels they are a part of seems a bit selfish. Breathe deep. Look for all the things that were done right and enjoy

them. Stop throwing out the 95% of wonderful to find the 5% of "could have been better."

Oh, look at my wrist. I said I wouldn't go on and on.

JadeHand | July 21, 04:33 CET

Thanks zeitgeist. The conversation actually calmed down by the time I finished writing my post. The harshest stuff was posted earlier, but people more well spoken (or written at least) than I seemed to have addressed it.

Just rewatched Act III again and there's so much room for interpretation in what happened in that act. So many great points to take apart and analyze, then recurgitate in a courteous manner.

ruthless1 | July 21, 04:36 CET

I think Penny Penny saying that "Captain Hammer will save us" is foreshadowing as is the online comic

<http://www.myspace.com/darkhorsepresents?issuenum=12&storynum=2> and such being copyrighted as Timescience BloodClub.

Notice that she says us not me. I don't think "Captain Hammer will save us" means what we think it means.

Anonymous1 | July 21, 04:43 CET

I agree with many others here that Penny is far from a weak female character. And I also do not believe that she is flawless or innocent.

The character of Penny seems a little saddened by what she has experienced in life. It seems she has had a fairly rough time of it. So innocent does not appear to be the correct term. However, I think she is a little naive in how she views people and especially Captain Hammer.

But it takes strength of character to go out and do what you think is the right thing to do - even though it may be arduous and difficult to achieve your desired results and most people will ignore you and pass you by.

JossIzBoss | July 21, 04:55 CET

I think a few of us **zoinkers & GVH**, for example, seem to use pieces of evidence in the art we're discussing to make a point. Even though the author of the piece may have gathered evidence to support their reflection on the topic, I do not think it was thorough enough to defend their stance on the topic of Penny. Just as I mentioned before, this requires more than just a once-through. There are layers here that can be interpreted in many ways... but

there comes a point where there is enough evidence in the piece that a solid argument can be made.

From second-linked article:

Let's dissect:

1. Not only does the show completely fail the Bechdel test, there is only one female character with a name, and she has no agency at any point in the show;
2. Her noble death is used to further the POV character's story, AKA, she's totally fridged;
3. She specifically dies after she's had sex!
4. She specifically dies after she's had sex with someone who isn't the Nice Guy main character who was totally sweet to her and bought her frozen yogurt! (How dare she...?);
5. She had sex with someone who isn't the Nice Guy main character, causing him to go evil(-er) and thus try and kill Captain Hammer, but she died instead, so it was her own fault!

1. agency (from Wikipedia):

Agency may refer to any of the following:

- * Agency (country subdivision)
- * Agency (law), **the status of a person who acts for another person.**

- * Agency (Mormonism)

- * **Agency (philosophy), the capacity to make choices**

- * Employment agency, a business that serves as a representative, acting on behalf of another

- * Free agency, availability status of a rostered player on a team or franchise.

- * Government agency, a department of a local or national government responsible for the oversight and administration of a specific function

- * International agency, an inter-governmental body

- * News agency

- * **Moral agency, capacity for making moral judgments.**

- * Structure and

agency, ability of
an actor to
organize future
situations and
resource
distribution.

The definitions I highlighted I think is expressed in Dr. Horrible. She does act for others (Homeless shelter for homeless). She does makes choices (volunteers, chooses to see Captain Hammer again, chooses to leave him on stage).

Moral (from The Free Dictionary):

mor·al (môr-l,
mr-)
adj.
1. Of or
concerned with
the judgment of
the **goodness or
badness of
human action
and character:
moral scrutiny;
a moral
quandary.**
2. **Teaching or
exhibiting
goodness or
correctness of
character and
behavior: a
moral lesson.**
3. **Conforming
to standards of
what is right or
just in
behavior;
virtuous: a
moral life.**
4. **Arising from
conscience or
the sense of
right and
wrong: a moral
obligation.**
5. Having
psychological
rather than
physical or
tangible effects:

a moral victory;
moral support.
 6. Based on
 strong likelihood
 or firm
 conviction, rather
 than on the
 actual evidence:
 a moral certainty.

Penny, in herself, demonstrates many definitions of moral (gives moral support to Billy, leads of life of good, attempts to inspire others to help those in need for the good, understands that Bad Horse is "bad" and Ghandi is "good").

2. This may have some validity, but it can also be argued that the protagonist is NOT Dr. Horrible, but Billy instead. His alter-ego is Dr. Horrible. When Penny dies, we no longer see Billy; Dr. Horrible is now in control, the public face. It does not further Billy's plot... instead it kills it.

3. She does not die after she has sex. In fact, the sex does not occur on-screen (it is not important for the viewer to see). What we DO see on-screen is her waiting for Billy at the Laundromat (after she had sex), waiting for her friend. We also see her completing her mission in finishing up the Homeless Shelter project. We see her inspire Captain Hammer (in the smidgen of a sense). The importance of being rebuffed by Billy (yet again) and still continue on living is an attribute I'd consider strong.

4. Billy was our nice guy, not Penny's. Captain Hammer was "sweet" to her. Just because she didn't sleep with the protagonist does not mean she didn't sleep with the Nice Guy. The town and the groupies consider CH a nice guy; DH is one of those who doesn't agree (for very legitimate reasons).

5. No, she did not sleep with the protagonist. However, I would argue that is NOT Penny's fault, but Billy's. In Act 1, Billy is the one who turns his back on a fellow Laundromat-person. In Act 3, it is Billy who does not show up for yogurt and laundry. In **Act 2**, Penny is more than open and caring when Billy communicates with her. She provides him moral support, listens to his problems, and shares with him her life experiences.

It was Billy's own demise that turned him into Dr. Horrible. Penny would have inhibited that, not provoked it. The fact that Billy knows that CH will sleep with her only catalyzes his own agenda- he was charged by Bad Horse to kill someone. CH is the one who helped make that clear on who. (Even though that's not how it turned out.)

This is the type of evidence needed to make a solid argument. Mine

can be debated, but for it to be considered thorough, I would like examples.

korkster | July 21, 04:59 CET

Notice that she
says us not me. I
don't think
"Captain Hammer
will save us"
means what we
think it means.

Anonymous1 |
July 21, 04:43
CET

I didn't quite catch what you meant, **Anonymous1**. Could you please elaborate? Where's the foreshadow?

korkster | July 21, 05:03 CET

Meh... this is like getting mad at Gandhi for cussing when he hits his thumb with a hammer. Well, not *that* hammer. Anyway, meh. They got their 15 minutes and then some by posting the hate-age. Got the attention they wanted. Good on em. Shall we get back to learning the words before the first midnight cult singalong screening now? I'll start.... "Laundry day...."

Mort | July 21, 05:33 CET

"..see you there. Underthings, tumbling. Wanna say, "Love your hair.".....

JadeHand | July 21, 05:40 CET

Oops, wrong thready-thread.

I think I have nothing to add here, I can see both sides of the argument.

[edited by crazygolfa on 2008-07-21 05:45]

crazygolfa | July 21, 05:44 CET

What I'm wondering is, why is there all this hub-bub over Penny not being a three-dimensional character when Captain Hammer was even less three dimensional? Shouldn't feminists be equally

concerned with men getting the shaft, what with feminism being about equality and all?

I loved Penny. She was the human one, the real one, the one who *wasn't* the stereotype, which is what made her stereotypical demise so touching.

mnsprn | July 21, 05:46 CET

I thought the ironic tragedy was that Penny was the only protagonist of the story.

Penny did the leg work on the signatures. She saw a problem and went about fixing it in a way that actually works, although it's more tedious unsung hero work. Real life heroes often go unnoticed and don't think of themselves as heroes.

Captain Hammer took all the glory. He was just the last person to sign. He doesn't actually care.

Billy cares, and understands society's problems, but is too cynical. He thinks the only way to fix the system is to get rid of it and take it over, which is impossible and thus makes him cynical.

Billy's alter-ego, Dr. Horrible may have the common goal of taking over the system, but with different intentions that were more ego driven which consumed Billy.

And so, two boys partaking in what amounts to a pissing contest killed the hero, destroyed themselves and saved no one.

GrrrIRomeo | July 21, 05:48 CET

GrrrIRomeo, while I would argue your point that Penny was the actual **hero** of the piece, I do not think she was the protagonist (from the free dictionary):

pro·tag·o·nist
(pr-tg-nst)
n.
1. **The main character in a drama or other literary work.**
2. **In ancient Greek drama, the first actor to engage in dialogue** with the chorus, in later dramas

playing the main character and some minor characters as well.

3.

a. **A leading or principal figure.**

b. The leader of a cause; a champion.

4. Usage Problem
A proponent; an advocate.

korkster | July 21, 05:56 CET

Well, she was the leader of a cause. Getting the homeless shelter another building.

NYPinTA | July 21, 05:59 CET

I think she was the protagonist goddess Promethea in disguise.

Do not bounce.

[edited by GrrrlRomeo on 2008-07-21 06:05]

GrrrlRomeo | July 21, 06:02 CET

Shouldn't feminists be equally concerned with men getting the shaft...

For some reason, this sentence made me giggle a lot.

Mort | July 21, 06:06 CET

My fairness gene has definitely kicked in. You can't say I didn't warn you.

I chose the word trivial very carefully. It is exactly that, criticism of this sort of thing is completely trivial when compared to the far greater injustices happening in the world, the greatest of which are rape, FGM, and the cultures that largely accept and, sometimes, encourage them -- this is no more strongly seen than in the case of "honour" killings. This is the very real injustice facing women in the world, and this is what we should be talking about, not prattling around about this.

"Trivial" and then "prattling", two words historically used to belittle

women. The thing is, this site is not for discussing those issues and the linked site is not either. Both are about discussing popular culture, each with its own focus, but neither with the focus you apparently feel we all should be discussing.

Nah, that article basically screams "Waah! Waah! I woke up cranky and needed to vent somewhere.". Makes the person in question appear petty and whiny and ridiculous.

More words traditionally used to belittle women. How many ways is she being painted as a small child not worthy of consideration in just two sentences? At least no one has suggested that author must be getting her period or needs to get laid.

Would the people who feel that it is okay to seriously assert that this woman should be concentrating on important things rather than analyzing pop culture, explain to me why the same is not said of all the articles and blogs that are linked here and indeed all of our own threads, since that is a major thing that we do? I have no problem with people agreeing or disagreeing with what she says, but for any of us to say that she should not be doing what we ourselves are doing strikes me as hypocritical.

When I said earlier that the triviality argument has traditionally been used against feminists and that that makes it particularly onerous, I probably was not as clear as I should have been. Every time women fought for anything or protested anything they were told that it was trivial compared to the things that they **should** be doing (and of course the men will tell them what that is.) In the USA, suffragettes were told that abolition of slavery was more important and then that the vote for African-American men was more important and so on. Women who wanted equal opportunities and pay in the work place, the right to own land, and have health insurance in their own names were constantly told that their concerns were trivial. It is one of the main weapons used to keep women in their place.

Almost everything is trivial when compared to the horrors of the world. Maybe we should close down the discussion of popular culture all together so we can all concentrate on the important things. Why are those of you who are saying she should be writing about important things instead of Joss Whedon's work here, and not off reading and posting about those important things yourselves on sites devoted to such things? Saje pointed out that we are in a glass house with this subject. He was right.

Hmmm. I think Fairness Girl has definitely changed to Fairness Woman at this point...**QuoterGal**, could she be Fairness Gal? Hmmm. I don't know.

Oh, and **Winther** I think you have me confused with someone else. (perplexed)

newcj | July 21, 06:12 CET

Wow, great thread. I stand with the people who saw Penny as being represented from Billy's POV. So she is idealized into a stereotype. Same with Captain Hammer. We can't really see every single character's motivation in a less than 45 minutes piece. I was pretty amazed at just how much I did connect with each character in that short a time. Stereotyping is a shorthand and in this piece it was needed. He had to cover a lot of ground quick.

I'm not horrified Penny wasn't as strong feministically {made up word but you get the idea} as Joss's females usually are. I was very sad to see her die before she got to be a little more self-actualized. She was clearly moving in that direction and it was heartbreaking to see that journey cut short.

Edited in to say, if people have problems with this piece, I'm just waiting to see the response to Dollhouse.

[edited by Vinity on 2008-07-21 06:37]

Vinity | July 21, 06:35 CET

Question:

Does Joss portray how he thinks it should be?

Or does he portray how he thinks it is, magnified by 100x, to get people's attention that it shouldn't be this way?

I think he does a combo of both. I think it's more the latter in the case of Dr. Horrible. Even when he portrays how he wishes it was, he attacks it with the tragedy of the way it is.

This is how it could be, and this is what gets in the way. The women who could save the world are casualties in the games men play that having little to do with saving anyone. And while it's great that women fight for equality and to not be casualties, the reality is we need more men on the same page that give a crap. Just like slaves needed the compassion of whites, and gays need the compassion of straight people, the world needs more men to care about what happens to women.

Joss just might be speaking more to the fanboy audience than the feminists because he has more power to get the attention of men and get them to care about women characters in ways more than "she's hot." Did Penny dying hurt? Good. Did it piss you off? You should be. Now stop being Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer and be more Billy.

And that's why I generally don't agree with the "Joss hates women" stuff. I think his intent is different than they think it is.

GrrrIRomeo | July 21, 07:13 CET

One other thought. If this author had done a feminist agenda based analysis of Dr. horrible and liked it, would people still be asserting that she should be doing important things rather than analyzing pop culture?

newcj | July 21, 07:15 CET

Joss just might
be speaking more
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of men and get
them to care
about women
characters in
ways more than
"she's hot." Did
Penny dying
hurt? Good. Did
it piss you off?
You should be.
Now stop being
Dr. Horrible and
Captain Hammer
and be more
Billy.

Woot.

JadeHand | July 21, 07:17 CET

JadeHand wrote:

Two thirds of the Evil League of Evil were female as Dr. Horrible joined. Clearly Joss thinks women are more evil than men, I mean.... Clearly.

I don't think so--about "two thirds," I mean. Half, maybe. Bad Horse **could** be female if "the nightmare is real" is meant to be a gender-specific (and not simply equine) pun. But other than that, I

see one horse, three women, three men--and now Dr. Horrible will tip the scales. (That is, unless you are talking about the finer points of gender, sexual identity, etc. and then Dead Bowie might be something to discuss. :))

[edited by shinygroovyj on 2008-07-21 07:35]

[edited by shinygroovyj on 2008-07-21 08:01]

shinygroovyj | July 21, 07:35 CET

*Bad Horse *could* be female*

They refer to Bad Horse as "he" throughout the piece and the fist letter talks about making Dr. Horrible his mare...which I guess he does...his night-mare. Muhahahahaha

I've got to get some sleep.

newcj | July 21, 07:44 CET

Mare... tool... I can see it.

korkster | July 21, 07:51 CET

newcj wrote:

about making Dr. Horrible his mare...which I guess he does...his night-mare. Muhahahahaha

Ah, yes! Good night.

shinygroovyj | July 21, 07:54 CET

I don't think
so--about "two
thirds," I mean.
Half, maybe. Bad
Horse *could* be
female if "the
nightmare is
real" is meant to
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will tip the
scales. (That is,
unless you are
talking about the
finer points of
gender, sexual
identity, etc. and
then Dead Bowie
might be
something to
discuss. :))

Sorry, excluding the leader "Bad Horse" (clearly male based on pronouns in lyrics and making someone their mare)the members were 2 females and one male on each side of the table until Dr. Horrible sat down. Not trying to argue, as I only brought this up to point out in exaggeration and absurdity the arguments that disparage this brilliant art. Love the writing, songs, actors/actresses.
enjoy the show.

JadeHand | July 21, 08:10 CET

I can see both sides.

I have to appreciate either Whedon or his fans, or both, for catalyzing a well-considered discussion of feminism and fairness with this little forty minute musical. It's been a discussion that I've greatly enjoyed reading.

I don't want to miss the forest or any of the trees.

sleeper | July 21, 08:24 CET

For which gender do Drew and Doug count? ;-)

Oh! And why wasn't it Bad *Goat*? Has Joss lost the goat-love?!

Errrr...you know what I mean.

OzLady | July 21, 08:31 CET

My lame attempts at humor obviously missed the mark. (To be honest: I did miss super-villain woman #3 in the lower right hand corner the first time out.) But, to be silly again: Unless Dead Bowie's androgyny counts for being a "woman," I count (by appearances, granted, and identifications made in the credits) only three.

I'll stop. :)

[edited by shinygroovyj on 2008-07-21 08:35]

shinygroovyj | July 21, 08:33 CET

I appreciated your humor shiny, and I tend to agree with your outlook if I'm reading it right.

I naturally tend to defuse volatile subjects with something lighthearted, and that's generally a good strategy, but there are some ticking bombs only Captain Hammer can defuse.

sleepier | July 21, 08:43 CET

I can't see anything postive came from linking to that article, maybe 'cause I can't see anything positive today...

SmileTime | July 21, 09:11 CET

No worries Shinygroovyj, I'm hitting the rum hard, and the appearances are brief. I'm likely wrong. I can admit that. I don't have to be right. My goal was only to go too far in order to challenge perceptions. I like to go to extremes, take arguments and break them with absurdities. This whole thread was started with the concept of "I will look for what I want to see until I see it, and ignore contrary evidence."

Paranoid folk will always find evidence that someone is out to get them. which I tried to communicate and failed. Hell, I'm sure there's "evidence" in every tv show produced that Hollywood hates white males. Heck even Doctor Horrible had 2 of them make bad decisions that cost them (and us) the life of someone they cared for (in their own twisted way). Clearly Joss thinks all white males are worthless.....

JadeHand | July 21, 09:14 CET

It's funny, the links got me thinking ... and actually helped me see Penny in a more positive light. Sometimes hearing the extreme version of your views can turn things in the opposite direction (or maybe I'm just a "serial contrarian", as Romo Lampkin might say).

zoinkers | July 21, 09:17 CET

If this author had done a feminist agenda based analysis of Dr. horrible and liked it, would people

still be asserting
that she should
be doing
important things
rather than
analyzing pop
culture?

It would depend on the importance people place on pop culture. Should we view it in the same way as we view other artistic concepts? Does it still remain pop culture if we do? And how far can ideology be applied to pop culture?

Simon | July 21, 09:33 CET

Strange, I share most of this in terms of analysis - as I've written before here:

<http://whedonesque.com/comments/16964#243607>

But not of the negative criticism. Of course Penny is a token for Hammer and becomes so more and more for Billy/Horrible. That is exactly the way in which the show criticizes masculine stereotypes: by exemplifying how destructive they are to human relationships.

Maybe the difference is that I don't subscribe to the idea that the media should provide us with role models. None of the characters in Dr. Horrible's could serve as a role model, and none of them is well-rounded in a realist sense. They're all larger and simpler than life, even Penny (being a larger-than-life angelic do-gooder). But that's OK. This is not about how people should be and only to a little extent about how they really are. It's about the roles and stereotypes that fashion the relationships between real human beings. And it also represents a quite radical critique of masculine stereotypes. To me, that's a much stronger feminist argument than just presenting role models.

Jakob Schmidt | July 21, 10:00 CET

I think the problem here, or at least the problem for this reviewer, is that Penny isn't an obvious feminist typecast. And when you hear Joss Whedon the world expects this now.

If you pay attention.. she is a meek, polite and a somewhat naive young woman. But she's also independent, proactive and is ambitious in her belief that she can change the world. I find Captain Hammer and Dr Horrible far more naive then she is.. well up until her death anyway.

[edited by alexa on 2008-07-21 10:10]

alexa | July 21, 10:09 CET

Jakob - that's the most in-depth, sophisticated analysis I've read so far. I'm very impressed. Particularly by the suggestion of complacency in Hammer's and even Penny's actions - I hadn't thought of that at all! Joss seems to be entering some very morally ambiguous territory ... I thought he was taking Penny's side, but maybe not. Maybe he's merely stating the problem and presenting the various solutions that all seem to have their own flaws - the anarcho/fascist overturning of everything, the muscle-bound enforcement of the status-quo, and the 'soft-headed liberal' desire to help the helpless, and perhaps keep them that way in the process.

zoinkers | July 21, 10:17 CET

Simon, as far as I can see ideology can be applied to anything, if you work hard enough at it, whether it makes sense to do so is a YMMV issue.

If Joss had let loose some of his more feminist instincts and cast the same story with an all female cast, I am sure some of the reviews would have included the words predictable and dead lesbian cliché, so no win, whichever way you turn Bad Horse will get you in the end.

Being politically correct and making everybody happy must be awfully hard work ;)

jpr | July 21, 10:29 CET

Being politically
correct and
making
everybody happy
must be awfully
hard work ;)

Which is why you should never try.

Winther | July 21, 10:38 CET

Thanks, zoinkers!

Jakob Schmidt | July 21, 10:40 CET

Almost everything is trivial when compared to the horrors of the world. Maybe we should close down the discussion of popular culture all together so we can all concentrate on the important things...Saje pointed out that we are in a glass house with this subject. He was right.

Thank you for being so eloquent, **newcj**. Whether or not people agree with the article or not (I think she has a lot of good points), telling other people that it isn't an important matter on a website *devoted to any* aspect of JW's work is breathtaking.

[edited by moley75 on 2008-07-21 11:18]

moley75 | July 21, 11:18 CET

This article certainly has stirred up some interesting discussions. Joss, what do you think about the article?

twinkle | July 21, 12:34 CET

I think part of the point of the Dr. Horrible film was that it was supposed to be, in part, a satire of your typical classic superhero tale (damsel in distress, big muscular hero who always saves the day, etc).

Then again, the biggest factor in the (lack of) development for Penny's character could have simply been the length of the film. When there's only forty minutes to work with a plot like this, the only character who really had time to be developed was the main one, Dr. Horrible.

Just my thoughts, that's all.

[edited by Gabriel on 2008-07-21 12:49]

Gabriel | July 21, 12:47 CET

twinkle it's kinda frowned upon here to ask Joss what he thinks of links etc.

Simon | July 21, 12:48 CET

newjc:

"Trivial" and then
"prattling", two
words historically
used to belittle
women.
...
Almost
everything is
trivial when
compared to the

horrors of the world. Maybe we should close down the discussion of popular culture all together so we can all concentrate on the important things...Saje pointed out that we are in a glass house with this subject. He was right.

Well, that was at least what I was getting at when I used the word trivial. Most arguments do seem trivial when compared to the horrors of the world, which is why I don't have a lot of patience with them -- but I do apologise for my brusque attitude about this, it's out of place here. And it's fair enough that you disagree with that too.

I do, however, take objection to the fact that you say I was using the word trivial to belittle women, when you evidently know exactly what I was using the word trivial to mean (and the "prattling" was referring to us, not to women specifically, and was meant to give a sense of the pettiness I perceived in this thread -- I wouldn't usually feel the need to state this explicitly, but I wouldn't want anything to be mis-interpreted).

This is the first thread I've needed to defend specific words I've used, but it is a sensitive subject, and with so many voices, it's easy to get messages confused.

[edited by MattK on 2008-07-21 14:14]

MattK | July 21, 13:58 CET

This is the first thread I've needed to defend specific words I've used

Oh, stick around, then ;) I've had to do it a number of times!

zeitgeist | July 21, 14:26 CET

This may have been already addressed in the above posts, but I would like to add to this by saying that, I think Joss is being very pro feminism in Dr Horrible.

He depicts Penny as being a quietly strong, moral, independent, proactive humanitarian, fighting for a cause bigger than herself. She is out there getting signatures, building homeless shelters. Even though she is idealistic and initially naive about Captain Hammer, (because Hammer portrays himself to Penny as someone else other than who he really is), she finally realises who he really is in the third act when he is making his speech. If she was weak and naive, she would have stayed seated and smiled at everything Hammer was saying, but she didn't. She realises who he is and leaves the stage to distance herself from him.

Penny's death, allowed us to see the weaknesses in the male protagonists. Hammer, who pretends to be a strong hero stereotype, is shown to be a quivering mess and that his bravado was a front. Billy, (shown to be bullied and weak at the beginning), wants to be Dr Horrible to gain infamy, money and power to, in his eyes, counteract his perceived impotence. He eventually accomplishes this, but is shown in the last frame that he is ultimately, still Billy and still flawed and weak. Joss shows us that even in death, Penny is honourable and strong, where as her protagonists are weak and flawed.

[edited by Jossaholic on 2008-07-21 15:25]

[edited by Jossaholic on 2008-07-21 16:19]

Jossaholic | July 21, 14:56 CET

I think she was the hero.

Yeah, me too. The death ray, the dark agenda, the heroic speech, the superoutfits? Fun, really fun, but not important. She was who mattered, and her work was what was helping people, and no one around her recognized it. Captain Hammer and Dr. Horrible justified a lot of what they did by saying it was for social change, but it wasn't their real motivation. They just wanted to be recognized as important people. And sleep with her. I like to think Dr. Horrible wanted more, but he also wanted to rule the world with her, and I doubt she'd have been into that, so. She was the only selfless character. Which is not the same thing as being a doormat.

It's really significant that no one even knew her name when her death was reported. She was just the famous guy's girlfriend, and that in name only since he was bullshitting that part mostly. She is, in short, treated the way most women still are. But with an awareness, with a deliberateness, with an ironic touch that highlights the flaws of people's perceptions and how very

destructive they can be. We got to see how caring she was, and we got a glimpse of more underneath, but that was it. She was on the cusp of a lot of things, and she got cut down as a bystander in a very understated way. The story quickly moves on without her and without anyone ever really seeing her for who she is. I thought it was awesome.

I didn't read her final words as what pushed Dr. Horrible over the edge. I think he was already gone by then. His reaction was certainly rather subdued. I think her final words were more of an indication of her faith in the ability of heroes to help people. Which was terribly ironic, since she was the only hero in the story.

Sunfire | July 21, 15:23 CET

I do, however, take objection to the fact that you say I was using the word trivial to belittle women, when you evidently know exactly what I was using the word trivial to mean (and the "prattling" was referring to us, not to women specifically, and was meant to give a sense of the pettiness I perceived in this thread -- I wouldn't usually feel the need to state this explicitly, but I wouldn't want anything to be mis-interpreted).

I do not understand how you think I am misinterpreting you, or how your explanation of the why you picked the words is in anyway contradictory to my objections. You said:

I chose the word trivial very carefully. It is exactly that, criticism of this sort of thing is completely trivial when compared to the far greater injustices happening in the world, the greatest of which are rape, FGM, and the cultures that largely accept and, sometimes, encourage them -- this is no more strongly seen than in the case of "honour" killings. This is the very real injustice facing women in the world, and this is what we should be talking about, not prattling around about this.

You chose trivial because you are comparing what the author is discussing to the horrors happening in the world, which is exactly what people have historically said about women's concerns in order to shut them up. You use "prattle" to describe the discussion arising out of the initial "trivial" subject matter thereby expanding the label of "unimportant" to the discussion as well as the original article. It does not matter who is taking part in the discussion, it is still disparaging the subject of the original article. Now you call the discussion petty, reinforcing the same point.

As I said in my previous comment, that's not to say this discussion is not relevant. Because media portrayal of women does have an impact on what people think. But as I type this, those other things are happening right now, out there, and that's why I referred to this dissection of the media as trivial.

And I ask again, Why does this author have to meet some higher standard and discuss those things happening when no one else on this site is? Why is this discussion singled out as trivial, prattle, and petty when the other articles about Dr. Horrible, Joss Whedon's, work or the 900+ comment thread still going on this same site are not?

newcj | July 21, 15:25 CET

I would just like to state that - while I don't have anything new to add that I myself, or others, have not already stated upthread and despite some harsher posts in the beginning of this thread, this has been a really interesting discussion. It's helped all of us get into words what we *liked* about Penny (which just goes to show that she was certainly not an unimportant, one-note character) and I've found both sides of the argument - when pertaining to the actual analysis of Dr. Horrible - very interesting (although I still hold to the opinion expressed upthread). Thanks all!

GVH, it seems that as our long thread is coming to a close (which I hope doesn't because I posted more questions there), this one will continue to grow. Balancing the scales, and all of that. It's still all Horrible though, which makes me happy.

So, you're saying you *liked* Dr. Horrible, **korkster**? :p.

But it would seem you got your wish re: the other thread. It's still going and I'm now wondering if we'll hit 1,000 comments there ;).

GVH | July 21, 15:34 CET

I didn't read her final words as what pushed Dr. Horrible over the edge. I think he was already gone by then.

Yeah I agree with that **Sunfire**. It's not her final words that push him over, it's the fact that they're her *final* words (which he'd already worked out). And agree with you and others that she wasn't weak (getting up and fighting the fight every day even when it's not

working arguably takes more strength than fighting the fight when you're seeing positive results) and that she was the only one acting out of selfless motives.

Saje | July 21, 15:49 CET

I don't agree with the article, but that is just my opinion. I think they got Penny all wrong. Most of my views echo a lot of what is already said here so I won't repeat everything, just throwing my two cents in that as a female, I think Penny was a lot stronger and had more personality than the article gave her credit for.

meimei42 | July 21, 16:09 CET

I know this thread has been beaten like a dead Bad Horse, but I'd like to throw in a few points.

(1) I've seen people refer to Penny as naive because she wants to see the good. **She is not!** Look at the scenes when she is trying to get signatures (and is treated with apathy) or after CH's immature "I got laid" statement during the homeless shelter speech. She is fully aware (and weary) of the situation. She then choses not to let that nonsense get in the way of what she does consider important. If she was naive, she would have been cheery the whole time she is getting crapped on. (I also don't think she was embarassed by having sex with CH, just that he was acting like a teenage boy at an important ceremony.)

I wasn't sure what to make of Penny's dying "CH will save us" line. One interpretation is that the reading is like the scene from "Wrath of Khan", where Khan's subordinate (son?) says "yours is the superior intellect". Penny's statement might be her expressing surprise/disappointment that CH was not heroic when he actually needed to be.

(2) Penny being quiet or meek does not make her a weak character. She works and persists and is the only one to attain her goal (untarnished). Like Cusack said of his character in Say Anything, sometimes it takes more strength not to throw a punch than it does to fight.

One of my favorite books is "Lathe of Heaven" by Ursula K. Leguin. We have a woman writer creating a story about a meek male protagonist, surrounded by Type-A personalities, but he is clearly the strongest character in the book. When George Orr first meets Heather (a fierce black lawyer), her initial impression was he wouldn't even crunch if she stepped on him. Midway through their conversation, she realizes that he won't break no matter how much pressure is put on him. (I wish I could find my copy, Leguin says it much better.)

(3) Now that the serious stuff is out of the way, why no protest about the **Equine Inequality** in media? There is only one horse in Dr. Horrible. While the leader, he is not even given lines, which are instead stolen and sung by the token homo sapien cowboys. (In fact, other than Mr. Ed, dialogue for horses is seriously underdeveloped.) With the death of the western genre, that means fewer roles for horses. What is the last sitcom that had a leading horse character? Where is the outrage?

OneTeV | July 21, 16:27 CET

Oh, stick around, then

What do you mean by "stick", exactly?

theonetruebix | July 21, 16:29 CET

I agree with Sunfire. After Penny's death, Joss portrayal of the media's perception of Penny was that she was, "what ever her name was" and "Heroes girlfriend". Penny was the real hero, but she was relegated behind "real heroes" or society's perception of what a real hero should be. Negating that she was the one who gave 250 people a shelter. She wasn't recognised by the media as the real hero because she didn't fit society's stereotype of what a hero should be, she was female and therefore not as significant and effectual as her male protagonists. This could possibly pertain to today's media and the lack of the media's willingness to portray more strong female role models and characters. Of which Joss is a strong opponent of.

[edited by Jossaholic on 2008-07-21 17:52]

Jossaholic | July 21, 17:45 CET

I have this theory that Dr. Horrible is actually autobiographical.

The Doc starts off pretty smart, kinda angry with the world, a little funny, and a whole lot awkward. Seems to me this is a pretty good summation of a teenaged Joss. (Remember what Marti Noxon said about Joss? "If he'd ever gotten a date in high school, none of us would have jobs.")

The Doc then gets what he wants -- fame, recognition, even a way to change the world a little -- but at the cost of killing the one he loves. Think about it: when did BtVS get good? When Joss started taking his characters to very dark places. "Innocence" springs to mind. So Joss's rep is built on putting his much-beloved characters through hell. And he really does love them.

I think Joss is saying, "Yeah, I'm good, but here's what it costs me." His genius is rooted in darkness, and I think he wrestles with that sometimes.

ManEnoughToAdmitIt | July 21, 18:18 CET

Let's not forget his depictions of the adoring masses! Okay, they're Hammer's masses, but they soon become Horrible's.

I think it's relevant to include Joss's take on the issue (just posted here in response to the first question)

But, yeah, Penny is not the feminist icon of our age. And yes, she does exist in the narrative as part of Doc's fate -- but everyone in the story is there to move the story. Is she less real than Hammer? (Is ANYTHING?) We gave her a cause so she wouldn't JUST be the Pretty Girl but the fact is, neither Doc nor Hammer gives her the attention she deserves -- Doc's crush comes before he has the slightest idea what she cares about. Which is not uncommon. It reminds me of Sweeney todd, the Judge and Sweeney singing "Pretty Women" -- a beautiful duet with no insight whatsoever. Just images.

But we shoulda gave her more

jokes.

Also see his comments regarding Dr. Horrible's structuring as a traditional tragedy.

[edited by zoinkers on 2008-07-21 18:54]

zoinkers | July 21, 18:49 CET

I've added a Den Of Geek link to the entry.

Simon | July 21, 19:35 CET

Praise you, Simon.

phlebotinin | July 21, 19:39 CET

So, you're saying
you liked Dr.
Horrible,
korkster? :p.

But it would
seem you got
your wish re: the
other thread. It's
still going and
I'm now
wondering if we'll
hit 1,000
comments there
;).

GVH | July 21,
15:34 CET

That would be a resounding "yes" for *Dr. Horrible*. And a "yes" for Dr. Horrible/Billy himself. I love tragedy, and comedy, and music, and action... and I love the fleshed-out-flaws of our characters and that we still love them.

I love how this has continued more discussion, and, as others have stated before, brings up to fresh realizations on what appeared to be a "once-through". :)

But, I don't think I'll get my wish. It's Monday, and people are posting here than there... so, I'll live, I guess. :)

korkster | July 21, 19:51 CET

"I've added a Den Of Geek link to the entry"

or Den of Week?

moley75 | July 21, 20:00 CET

I may be waffling a bit here ...

While I agree with the criticism in these articles on dramatic terms, I think putting them in a feminist context smacks of bad faith.

I haven't totally thought through my viewpoint here, kinda posting from the gut, because I'm a little irked. I think these authors haven't considered the deeper implications of what they're saying. Are they saying that Dr. Horrible, by itself, actually causes harm to people's perceptions of women by furthering a stereotype? Or is it that they react badly to *any* depiction of a woman as less than strong and independent? Heck, I wouldn't consider myself particularly strong or independent, regardless of my gender (I'm male). I sympathize with Penny - I'm non-confrontational, I'd hide behind a chair if battle broke out between a superhero and supervillain, and I don't think I'd confront a public speaker in the middle of a speech (song), either, even if they were humiliating me. I think I'd slink away, too, or more likely just sit there quietly and take it up with him after the fact. I'm not proud of it, but I can relate.

This has been said already, but I'll say it again. Does every single female character anyone creates ever have to be a role model for women?

zoinkers | July 21, 20:07 CET

| or Den of Week?

I should never add a link just before dinner is ready.

Simon | July 21, 21:21 CET

I think it's unfortunate that Joss' work now has to shoulder specific expectations as to content. As those expectations pile on, the notion of fitting everything people expect into something on the scale of three small webisodes becomes impossible (or, if not impossible, certainly straitjacketing to the creative process).

I think it's great that Joss has a history with strong women characters, but I don't believe feminism is best served by myopic or monotone approaches to one's work.

And given that Penny is the only honest character in the story (both the Doc and the Captain lie to her to get closer and treat her as a prize; both the Doc and the Captain show a lack of interest in actually understanding her) ... well, okay, she's a romantic and a bit blinded by events, but she's a sweet soul with a good cause. All three characters are fundamentally childish in some way, but out of that she's at least the nice kid. She is by far the best *person* in the show.

The idea that she'd need to be something else in order to fulfill an agenda that was never promised for the show seems ... well, just nonsensical. And the idea that ideals can't be explored by illustrating the problem (rather than showing off an idealized solution) seems to be missing every kind of useful point.

[edited by Ghalev on 2008-07-21 21:57]

Ghalev | July 21, 21:26 CET

The article got me thinking but I can't feel angry about Penny's portrayal. I saw her as a steady, positive force among the fun and nonsense of the overblown male characters. Someone in the very long thread mentioned that they found her reminiscent of the decoy Buffy in The Chain.

I'm sure there were comic book and musical references that went over my head but these two echoes influenced my take on Penny's death:

- DrH's words "Here lies everything..." evoked Willow's incantation in Bargaining part 1 "Here lies the warrior of the people. Let her cross over". So, far from thinking of Penny as a victim I was put in mind of someone who saved the world a lot.

- When DrH carried P to the table/gurney I was reminded (since I've only recently read it) of Buffy season 8 #14 and Buffy carrying Aiko.

As for her final words, I was so sure she didn't believe them (whatever Dr H may have thought) that I can't agree with anyone who thinks that they made her seem silly. Instead I'm prompted to ask questions that I can't find clear cut answers to. Was she seeking to reassure Billy? What assumptions are we being invited to make about death bed utterances-which I picture as usually being religious in nature?

purplehazel | July 21, 23:08 CET

I'm with the "blood loss" school of thought. She clearly was starting to see through Hammer's shtick, so her last words don't make sense to me any other way. Also, when she says "Billy, is that you?" it

sounds pretty delirious to me.

zoinkers | July 21, 23:25 CET

Or that might just indicate that his disguise is like Clark's glasses i.e. she's genuinely not sure if it's Billy, she's just going by the overheard name.

I don't really buy the "blood loss" idea to be honest, smacks a bit of special pleading. I think the way she dies still believing in the possibility of heroes is more tragic (or maybe I could get behind the "she sees something in Hammer that others haven't - yet" theory).

Saje | July 21, 23:31 CET

Special pleading? Severe blood loss can cause a stroke, which can in turn cause some peculiar neurological effects. And in general, I understand people say some pretty strange things in the moments before they die.

zoinkers | July 21, 23:56 CET

Perhaps I should have used the term "flavour" instead of "cornerstone principle"...

daylight | July 22, 01:09 CET

The linked articles and the resulting comments - and Joss in WaPo, of course - have given me insight into Penny and DHSAB in general. But I wish we could discuss a feminist analysis without so many people hating on feminism.

CA Bridges cites Andrea Dworkin as being part of the "men are bad" wing of feminism. Although she wrote about bad things done by men, she didn't believe that men were bad by nature or inferior to women.

<http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/LieDetect.html>

Most feminists do not require all female characters to be strong. But many of us long for more stories that center on women, or have a female protagonist. The majority of stories in pop culture focus on men. Men predominate among screenwriters and directors. This is not equality. That's why some feminists feel let down when up crops another story about a man's emotional journey.

Re: "agenda analysis." People bring their beliefs, values, background, etc., into any analysis. The people who don't care about feminism or dislike it may not mention gender in their writing. But this doesn't make them unbiased. They are propping up the status quo, in regard to gender.

B!x suggests that feminists will pick and choose whatever will advance their agenda. That's a sweeping indictment, and it's a criticism that could be applied to many people who are trying to make a point.

The idea, expressed by MattK, that the true injustice against women happens elsewhere is an old argument against feminism. It's always worse somewhere else.

Suzie | July 22, 01:29 CET

I think, in regards to the comments posted here, your own arguments are a little sweeping, Suzie. This thread, like any thread, focuses on discussion regarding these articles, which in turn focus on DHSAB. That's the context I read into these comments, and it sounds to me like you're reading them to be more general than they mean to be.

But I suppose I can't really speak about any intent other than my own. I, for one, merely have a problem with these specific reactions to this piece of fiction - not all feminist critique of Whedon, or all feminist critique, and certainly not feminism in general! My specific problem is that on the one hand, the criticism of DHSAB in all three cases states it stands apart from his other work, and yet it constantly invokes "tropes" from other fiction. If one is allowed to pull in vast cultural trends in critique of one piece of fiction, surely that author's other content is relevant as well in reading into the intent of the piece.

[edited by zoinkers on 2008-07-22 03:16]

zoinkers | July 22, 03:15 CET

Special pleading? Severe blood loss can cause a stroke, which can in turn cause some peculiar neurological effects. And in general, I understand people say some pretty strange things in the moments before they die.

I'm aware of the effects of blood loss but i'd point out that we don't see that much blood and - this is where the special pleading comes in - she just happens, in her shock induced delirium, to say something that makes sense as a tragic sign of misplaced hope rather than e.g. something that's clearly the result of delirium and/or related to dying (that Billy looks funny with his "eyes" on top of his head or about the light fading maybe) ? Dialogue in scripted fiction doesn't just happen and it seems like a stretch to me to think Joss/Jed/Zack/Maurissa sat thinking "Penny needs to say something nonsensical as she dies, I know, let's make it about her misplaced belief in Captain Hammer for which we've previously provided plenty of textual evidence". Doesn't fly for me, YMMV ;).

(might be a good question for any comic-conners to ask
Joss/Jed/Zack/Maurissa)

Saje | July 22, 10:33 CET

I guess there's some kind of strong female stereotype. While I really dig watching women kicking the crap out of bad guys, I also like that there exists female characters that don't kick the crap out of anyone....but I don't think that they are not strong.

I don't see the problem with "That she seemed so sweet and optimistic and lovely" and I'm not particular moved by the idea of an alternate ending where she suddenly gets some balls agency. That has worked in other stories that I've enjoyed, but for this character in this story, I don't think it works because then the point of it would be different.

I don't think Penny is naive. She is idealistic. But it is actually harder to try to see the good in people in this world than it is to be cynical. People suck okay. But, I feel fortunate that I have girlfriend who is more inclined to think otherwise.

What I think is tragic is that people view such women as being weak or dull. We only got a glimpse into this character, and I'd like to think that if we got a longer look there'd be more...sweetness and niceness and compassion, and plenty of agency which stems from that. 'Cause I think these are actually good qualities that humanity surely cannot survive without. You don't have to be pissed off or cynical to have balls agency.

Agency, balls... insulting either way I think. Because Penny was doing something. And people who think petitioning is not an effective way to create change surely has not been paying attention. It works all the time. It's how non-elected citizens get things on the ballot for the public to vote on. I've seen signatures delay government decisions. The system does work if you actually, you know, try to use it.

GrrrIRomeo | July 22, 14:06 CET

Saje, looking back, it seems like we're arguing about different things. I agree that the last line's tragic, and not designed merely to indicate a deranged state of mind. I used blood loss (probably internal bleeding from an unwillingness to be gratuitously bloody in an internet short anyone can watch) merely as the explanation for her convenient short-term memory loss. Probably shock is the better explanation, though. She's completely forgotten about the embarrassing speech and apparently didn't see Hammer running out the door. But the line was definitely intended to be a final gut-punch for Billy. It's merely the context and delivery that

suggests it's partly due to cognitive impairment.

zoinkers | July 22, 22:12 CET

Nah, I think that *is* what we're arguing about **zoinkers** ;).

I.e. I think though she's definitely gone off Hammer as a boyfriend, she still believes in him as a hero (I agree she hasn't seen him run off, that was after the whole "mortal wound" thing, she might've been a bit pre-occupied ;) and doesn't say that because she's cognitively impaired (unless you consider hope a cognitive impairment - in the wee small hours I might make a case for that ;). She seems weak at the end (cos she's dying) but she also seems clear eyed and in her right mind to me, not flakey or impaired.

There're a lot of assumptions we *could* make to make cognitive impairment fit (internal bleeding, strokes etc.) but to me, from what we see (and what we *have* seen) the simplest, most consistent explanation, requiring the fewest made-up assumptions is, she still (tragically) believes in Captain Hammer. Until further evidence presents itself (if it ever does) this might be one we just have to agree to differ on ;).

Saje | July 22, 22:29 CET

I guess it comes down to a reading of the specifics of the situation. I definitely see her eyes as unfocused, and she has a hard time recognizing Billy, even when he's right in front of her (the whole alter-ego/disguise thing I don't buy as much, he's barely disguised). I don't think it's such a stretch ... I've been around dying people in their last moments and stroke victims, and I think her behavior fits that pattern. Not that Dr. Horrible is exactly *cinema verité* ...

But then, she's reassuring *him*, isn't she? She doesn't even know she's dying. See, I just think that furthers the argument that she's delirious - I don't think it's at all what she would've said if she were aware of the situation. I think she would be a little more emotional, too ... I see what you're saying about lack of evidence, though. Nothing's stated, and I'm reading into the nuances of her performance ... so yeah, there's leeway.

[edited by zoinkers on 2008-07-23 00:22]

zoinkers | July 23, 00:11 CET

GrrrlRomeo: I'll add to that that she's the only character to leave a positive legacy. Sure, Captain Hammer flexed his these-are-not-the-hammers to get the Mayor to sign the building over, but he would not have done so on his own.

She was honest, she was goodhearted, she had a good cause and she

was doing something about it. She was the best person in the show, and it's a bit confusing that some people think that makes her "weak." I agree wholeheartedly that there's more to a genuinely strong person than living up to a (fun when it's good) strong-chick stereotype.

Ghalev | July 23, 09:19 CET

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