

Mary Alice Money: Exploring *Firefly's* "Heart of Gold"

"Heart of Gold," w. Brett Matthews, dir. Thomas S. Wright, episode 1.13 of Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, is probably the most simple-minded episode of that marvelous series. Whedon himself states that it was an opportunity for the crew to really "do a Western": "Let's help a bunch of nice whores and get ourselves into kind of a classic Western scenario" (qtd. in *The Official Firefly Companion*, II: 174). And they certainly fit in, all without irony or parody, a remarkable number of iconic Western elements: a wind-swept prairie settlement, a rag-tag band of altruistic mercenaries, a group of marginalized working-class "homesteaders" (prostitutes), the local power-mad land baron, much violence and gunplay (and laser beams), some deaths, a birth, a funeral, an execution, some sex, and the hero on a horse tackling the villain on a hovercraft. The villain is unredeemable and the hero will win.

So why would Joss Whedon televise such a simple story?

First, of course, much of the fun of the episode is in seeing horse opera turned into space opera, noting the echoes of classic Western movies. Second, the viewer sees that the changes in the Western elements reveal new versions of gender roles and sexual attitudes. While David Magill argues that the male characters "demonstrate the range of gender's flexibilities" ("I Aim to Misbehave," *Investigating Firefly and Serenity*, 174), I argue that the women characters in "Heart" do so. Third, supporting all the action is a conflict between two versions of the Western myth: Turner's Frontier thesis and Slotkin's Progressive vision of the frontier, both discussed by Froese and Buzzard (*Slayage* 13.2, par 14+) and Lorna Jowett (*Investigating* 108+). Finally, the key to "Heart of Gold" is enjoying the unexpected juxtapositions of genres, character roles, and themes in this "simple" episode.