

Wesley Ferrell

Mandziuk

COMM 4307

May 2, 2023

How Steven Universe Tells A Transgender Narrative

When Steven Universe first debuted on Cartoon Network in 2013, many didn't assume much from the world Rebecca Sugar, series creator, was beginning to build. Nobody predicted the Crystal Gems' origins as intergalactic parasites part of an ambitious empire looking only to expand, nobody foresaw the massive fanbase the series would garner, and no one picked up on the queer story Sugar wanted to tell with its titular and notably male presenting protagonist. In retrospect, we've seen the series break boundaries with the portrayal of a lesbian wedding, we've seen Steven travel the cosmos to confront the dictators spearheading the Gem empire, and we've seen the epilogue series *Steven Universe Future*, in which Steven confronts his traumatic upbringing and moves on from the small beach town he called home. In the fifth season of the original series, we see that conflict unfold in its finale *Change Your Mind* (2019), where Steven overcomes the primary antagonist, White Diamond, by proving to her that she is wrong about her ideology and practices. While Steven Universe has been praised by critics for its representations of various races, sexual orientations, and gender identities, I believe critics often overlook the transgender subtext present in the final season as well as the whole series. Through narrative analysis of the plot and worldbuilding, and semiotic analysis of the iconography and character designs, I hope to prove that Steven Universe sub-textually tells a transgender coming-of-age story.

Gems in the series are extraterrestrial beings that are inorganic, sex and genderless (though they are all coded as female), have bodies made of light with a gemstone at their core, and are created to fulfill specific purposes to support the empire, which is headed by the Diamond Authority. Gems that are sentient are objectified, both literally and figuratively. After Steven arrives on the Gem Homeworld, he observes the walls whispering about his arrival and statues making passing glances at him. One of the Gem matriarchs, Blue Diamond, has a sentient comb-gem that sings to her as she brushes her hair in the episode *Familiar*. Even gems that appear to have a hominid form are treated as though they don't have agency, like pearls which are made to order servants for high-ranking Gems. Any Gem that subverts their expectations are ostracized from their society and are dubbed "Off-Color." Gem society is organized in a caste system, with diamond matriarchs at the top and Off-Color Gems at the very bottom. This is how Homeworld creates others in their society.

One of the ways Gems can go Off-Color is by fusing with a Gem of a different kind. In series lore, Gem fusion is a tactic Gems can use to combine their size and strength into one being to efficiently serve the empire. 2 rubies could combine their strength to create a single entity if need be, but a ruby and a sapphire cannot fuse and still fit into their strict role. For the Crystal-Gems rebelling against Homeworld, fusion has a different connotation. "Fusion is the ultimate connection between gems," as described by Pearl in season 2 episode 9, *We Need to Talk*. Fusion is more about the relationship between 2 gems than it is for utility. We see this represented most in the main character Garnet, who is the sapphic-coded love of Ruby and Sapphire embodied.

The way fusion is frowned upon by Homeworld Gems is similar to real-life homophobia. We see this analogy drawn in the season 2 episode *Log Date 7 15 2*, where Peridot, a gem from Homeworld being held prisoner by the Crystal Gems, is initially confused and uncomfortable with

Garnet existing as a “perma-fusion,” calling her “the worst,” out of any of the Crystal Gems. Later in the episode, Garnet offers her an olive branch by asking to fuse with her. Though Peridot is unsuccessful in her fusion attempt, she ends the episode enlightened. She logs, “I have attempted a fusion with the fusion Garnet. I had hoped to gain a better understanding of fusion. Instead, I got a better understanding of Garnet.” In this instance, the show directly uses Garnet as a teaching tool about fusion, and by extension relationships, for Peridot.

Garnet and the concept of fusion is being used as a teaching tool on other characters and the audience about homosexual relationships. In her essay, Zolciak discusses how the magic used in *Steven Universe* allows it to portray characters of various sexual orientations and gender identities, “The symbolic union of Ruby and Sapphire is an example of magic in cartoons, which provides for children not only imaginative play but also an opportunity for learning.” These learning opportunities are important especially for children who might not hear a message of acceptance from the people around them.

Even as early as season one, magic and fusion is used to present us with a character that is both nonbinary and intersex in the form of Stevonnie, the fusion of Steven and his human love interest, Connie. Cao mentions this in their article writing, “In their debut episode, Stevonnie gallivants off to explore the physicality of their form and expresses both exhilaration and trepidation over navigating this new body.” This early representation proves showrunners were determined to ensure queer narratives were included in their show.

By using magic to codify the homosexual and nonbinary identities of its characters, *Steven Universe* can tell a message of acceptance and empathy that most conservative parents, or network executives, wouldn't find too egregious. Like Dunn says in their article, “The genre of the fantasy

children's cartoon and its incarnation in *Steven Universe* is thus able to magically lift the material constraints that often serve to block genderqueer and agender representation in realist media. In doing so, the show offers us a glimpse into how we can move beyond the magic realm that lends such power to *Steven Universe*'s gender nonconforming characters, and into a more ubiquitous media representation of a variety of trans identities." Though *Steven Universe*'s representation is somewhat obscured by the veil of magic, its representations are still important to expand the worldview of the audience and increase awareness of queer people and the issues they face in the present day.

As was mentioned before, Off-Color Gems are cast out of Gem society or are even executed, which is evident from Yellow Diamond's remark at Steven during the season 5 episode *The Trial*, she revolts, "Is that Rose Quartz? Look at this hideous form she's taken. Forget the trial. We should shatter her just for looking like that!" They believe that Steven is just another form of his mother, Rose Quartz, because Gems can reform to be any shape they want to be, and Steven has his mother's gemstone embedded in his navel. Rose Quartz, leader of the crystal gems and Pink Diamond in disguise, gave up her life to conceive him. Yellow sees this young boy as Off-Color and therefore he must be eradicated. Because of his presentation as male, she has decided he no longer deserves respect or life.

Steven isn't your average white male protagonist. He defies gender roles often, with critic Brittany Pladek writing, "Crucially, *Steven Universe* never plays Steven's femininity for laughs, and his choices are always supported by the Crystal Gems..." *Steven Universe* is a half gem, half human hybrid that is coded as a transgender man. The writers use Steven's magical conception to obscure this in a similar way that they use fusion to obscure homosexual subtext. A female coded character, Rose Quartz, has transformed into and become a part of a male human child, Steven

Universe. As Steven grows in his new identity, he must prove to those around him that he is a different person than his mother before him and gain their respect and acceptance as Steven. Parallels to the transgender experience of coming out, having a different name, changing your appearance, and seeking the approval of your family members can be drawn easily.

The familial aspect of the series was always there, but never was it more apparent than after *A Single Pale Rose* aired mid-season 5. In this episode, it's revealed that Pink Diamond was Rose Quartz in disguise. This twist changes many character dynamics in the series, but the one I want to focus on is the shift between how the Diamonds view Steven after they learn the truth. Steven even says in *Reunited* when confronting them, "Please, the fighting has to stop. We aren't enemies; we're family." Once they know he has the gem of Pink Diamond, he is seen as Pink Diamond, but not as Steven. Though the Diamonds are totalitarian intergalactic dictators, they serve a more important function symbolically than read as literal fascists. By the finale, they are a symbolic representation of a family, Blue and Yellow acting as siblings who are accepting, while White is the parent who is not.

This familial hierarchy can be seen in the iconography of Homeworld. Before Pink Diamond faked her death to become Rose Quartz, the Diamonds used a 4-diamond logo with white at the top, blue and yellow in the middle, and pink underneath all three. This semiotically signifies that Pink Diamond is at the bottom of the hierarchy. Their character designs also lend to this, as Pink Diamond is physically much smaller than any of the other diamonds. Her outfit is even inspired by a court jester, which is the entertainer of the royalty. All this symbolism subtly tells the viewer that Pink Diamond is infantilized by those who are supposed to be her equals. This draws parallels between Steven's relationship with the Crystal Gems early in the series run, where they treated Steven as more helpless since he couldn't control his power.

In the series finale, He first convinces Blue Diamond to accept him as Steven since she always had a soft spot for Pink, she says, “I always thought that you were failing this world. But, if you were happier on Earth, maybe... this world was... failing you.” Shortly afterwards she addresses him for the first time as Steven. This act of solidarity tells the audience that Blue accepts this new identity and has become an ally. She even tells off Yellow later, saying “She prefers to be called ‘Steven.’” Even though she may not understand completely, she understands she’s treated him wrongly.

When he confronts White Diamond, she doesn’t put up with his appearance for long, so much so that she forcefully removes Steven’s gem from his body, believing that Pink Diamond had embedded herself inside a human child instead of becoming one. Steven’s perspective is split in half as his human and Gem halves fight to fuse back together. Shamus writes in their review of the episode, “This whole sequence, in fact the whole episode, reads as a giant metaphor for the horrific things that can happen between families. To run with that, White is the mother. Demanding her children be perfect to make things better. Demanding they follow her vision of the world without letting them be who they really are.” After they join back together, White throws a tantrum and begins to blush pink, making her go Off-Color. Confronted with the idea of having a flaw, she breaks down, “This can’t be happening! I can’t have a flaw! I’m supposed to be flawless! If I’m not perfect, then... who am I?! If you’re not Pink, then... who are you?! Who- Who is anyone?!” Steven has successfully changed her ideological viewpoint enough that she understands that he is not Pink Diamond anymore.

These representations are so important in children’s media because queer kids do exist, and they deserve to see themselves on screen. One doesn’t need to be a full-grown adult before they realize that they are different from other people. That their society isn’t structured to allow them

to thrive. That they actively have prejudice against them daily. It's also important for heteronormative people to hear this message of acceptance and empathy at young ages. Through the media we consume, we can look critically at the world around us like Gebre Sela says in her review of the series, "Intentionally setting out to deconstruct boundaries, particular around the gender binary, Sugar's world building is executed in a way that allows for discussions about our real-world society by using the constructed colonial universe of Steven Universe." By using magic to slip its queer representation under the radar, *Steven Universe* tells a uniquely queer story through the lens of a straight male character. Its messages about family, empathy, and acceptance are timelessly relevant. I'm glad I got to grow up with the series.

Works Cited

- Dunn, Eli. "Steven Universe, fusion magic, and the queer cartoon carnivalesque." *Gender Forum*. Vol. 56. No. 1. 2016.
- Cao, Caroline. "'Steven Universe': 5 Ways This Kids Show Was Queer before Its Lesbian Kiss." *IndieWire*, IndieWire, 13 July 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/07/steven-universe-queer-rebecca-sugar-1201983866/>.
- Gebre, Sela. "'Steven Universe' Offers a Familiar Critique of Colonialism." *Bitch Media*, 21 Oct. 2017, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/familiar-world/steven-universes-anticolonial-critique>.
- Kelley, Shamus. "Steven Universe: Change Your Mind Review." *Den of Geek*, 22 Jan. 2019, <https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/steven-universe-change-your-mind-review/>.
- Pladek, Brittany. "Steven Universe." *Science Fiction Film & Television*, vol. 9, no. 3, Sept. 2016, pp. 501–04. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.libproxy.txstate.edu/10.3828/sfftv.2016.9.18>.
- Zolciak, O. (2020). "I Am a Conversation": Gem Fusion, Privilege, and Intersectionality. In: Ziegler, J., Richards, L. (eds) *Representation in Steven Universe*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi-org.libproxy.txstate.edu/10.1007/978-3-030-31881-9_4