DIALOGUE
The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

"I am a Conversation": Media Literacy, Queer Pedagogy, and *Steven Universe* in College Curriculum

Misty Thomas
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA
mthoma08@unm.edu

ABSTRACT:
The recent cartoon show on Cartoon Network *Steven Universe* allows for the blending of both queer theory and media literacies to create a pedagogical space for students to investigate and analyze not only queerness, but also normative and non-normative identities. This show creates characters as well as relationships that both break with and subvert what would be considered traditional masculine and feminine identities. Additionally, *Steven Universe* also creates a space where sexuality and transgender bodies are represented. This paper demonstrates both the presence of queerness within the show and the pedagogical implications for using this piece of media within a college classroom.

Keywords: popular culture; *Steven Universe*; Queer Theory; media literacy; pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Media literacy pedagogy is expanding as new advances and theories are added each year along with recommendations on how these theories can work together. Two of these pedagogical theories are Media Literacies and Queer Pedagogy. This blended pedagogical approach is useful for not only courses in media studies, but also composition classes. Media literacies focus on the use of various forms of media to investigate the role media plays in the creation and reinforcement of identity. Due to this focus on identity representations, media literacy effectively combines with queer pedagogy, which investigates the concepts of normalization within the classroom.

Amy Winans defines queer pedagogy as "decentering dominant cultural assumptions, exploring facets of the geography of normalization, and interrogating the self and the implications of affiliation" (107). Another way to understand queer pedagogy is that it "seeks to problematize the normal, choosing to focus on the centre rather than the margins in order to disrupt the status quo" (Coll & Charlton 309). Using queer pedagogy creates a classroom space where the instructor and the students question what they both assume to be normative while also questioning why those features of culture, such as gender roles, are considered normative.

By combining media literacy and queer pedagogy, we end up with a new approach to the inclusion of media in the university classroom. The overall benefit of "drawing on popular culture texts is their potential to challenge heteronormativity" (Allen 770), which is crucial when combining queer pedagogy and popular culture. I will illustrate the combination of these two pedagogical approaches using the 2013 Cartoon Network show *Steven Universe* that will provide us with a unique approach. The reason for this is that *Steven Universe* embraces its queerness in both its storylines and characters, resulting in it being a model for blending media literacy and queer pedagogy. Students at the university level could study queer theories along with media studies and then investigate *Steven Universe* through this lens.

MEDIA LITERACY AND QUEER PEDAGOGIES

Media literacies require students and instructors to actively engage with the media world around them. The purpose of media literacies, or media education, is "not only about the analysis of messages but [also about] an awareness of why those messages are there. Therefore, the critical media education movement integrates textual analysis along with questions of production and reception" (Wyatt & Silva 3). With this particular pedagogical approach, the focus is placed on students recognizing the messages put forth by various media platforms while also investigating the motivations behind those messages. These messages are wide reaching, resulting in media literacies serving "as a counter-hegemonic tool for groups that are marginalized and oppressed based on class, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality" (Wyatt & Silva 11). This classroom curriculum requires students to investigate the representations that are vital to how they understand and perceive themselves while also looking at the power structures behind these representations.

Media literacies also focus on the creation and reinforcement of the audience's identity. As students watch and engage with the media around them, their own sense of who they are is reflected or challenged through character representation. Yet, arguably, this occurs without their knowledge or permission, as they are not fully active participants in this formation before learning how to think critically about these messages. Due to this constant involvement, it is crucial "to examine how media texts contribute to identity formation, especially among youth who often engage in an intensified process of shaping and reshaping their identities as they encounter new aspects of their world" (Kemmit 167). Students are not only shaping their identities based on what they see but are also re-shaping their identities based on their thoughts and examinations. Due to the immense importance placed on the connection between media and identity, it is vital that students are able to critically evaluate both. It is through this critical eye on the formation of identity that media literacy pedagogy

interacts with queer pedagogy. While utilizing queer pedagogy might seem to be limited to only queer youth, it is applicable to any student found in the classroom. In response to this issue, Amy Winans argues, "Queer pedagogy challenges all students regardless of their sexual identities because it calls into question the process of normalizing dominant assumptions and beliefs, as it challenges instructors to question and to continue to test their own pedagogy" (106). Focusing on what is considered normative within society allows for a space where students (and instructors) can look at what is viewed as nonnormative, which is the focus of queer pedagogy and is the reason why it easily merges with media literacies.

However, utilizing media literacy pedagogy is problematized by the media the students and instructors bring to the forefront. Obviously, not all representations are positive, as some are negative in terms of being cliché or of reinforcing stereotypes about groups of people. Erica Scharrer articulates this struggle well, arguing, "Encouraging students to recognize both positive and negative roles of media in their lives as well as in society at large is a crucial guideline in media in their lives can (and should) be present in the curriculum regardless of the philosophical approach" (20). Students must be introduced to both the positive and negative representations of various identities and groups of people. Critically investigating the ways that media is posited as being positive opens up an area where students are able to recognize that no representation is perfect. In this framework, students are encouraged to decide whether the representation the media puts forward is positive or negative, and what the drawbacks are with both. Students then "employ *their own* ideas about 'right' and 'wrong' and 'good' and 'bad' to develop individual critical strategies. Students can question the values that are embedded in media and determine whether they meet their own, potentially highly personalized, standards" (Scharrer 21). From the moment that students decide whether or not a media representation is positive or negative, they are engaging critically with the elements that influence their own identities.

Despite the benefits to this approach, media literacy scholars recognize the dangers of investigating media-based representations, whether they be negative or positive, and these dangers are two-fold. On the one hand, in order for this approach to generate any outcomes, the students must engage in regular debate and discussion concerning topics that often are based on deep-rooted belief systems and experiences. Students' relationships with the media they interact with are never simple, resulting in the possibility for class discussions that disintegrate into chaos. While these are valid concerns, it is impossible to prevent all heated discussions that cross the boundary from a classroom discussion to a chaotic argument. As the instructor, it is crucial to recognize that this possibility is always present. The other drawback to this pedagogical approach is the possibility of negative effects impacting students, as their sense of identity is at once both fragile and deeply rooted within their belief systems. By asking them to investigate such topics and to critically analyze them, instructors run the risk of unraveling and damaging a student's identity. The fear here, then, is that students experience a negative effect on their self-esteem and their confidence in their identity. While this is a valid concern, critically analyzing what makes certain representations negative and the reason why it affects individuals in such a way is a crucial skill for students to gain. Instructors should attempt to "personalize the curriculum and encourage students to consider how their relationships with and responses to media are, at times, similar to that of others, and, at times, unique to their own positions and perspectives" (Scharrer 22). What this means is allowing students to bring in the representations that they find most engaging, in either a positive or negative manner. This allows them to discuss the representations as a class, unpacking it in a way that is beneficial for everyone present.

Investigating the Gaps in Representation

Additionally, media literacy allows students to investigate the gaps in representations, which is where queer pedagogy can heighten a class' investigation into media. As the name suggests, queer pedagogy is rooted in queer theory, which aims to "challenge and break apart conventional categories of male and female and by extension the paradigm of hetero versus homo identities that proliferate in popular culture"

(Lipton 164). The goal of encouraging students to also critically examine the gaps in representations can be accomplished during the course and through the assignments students complete. While in the depths of the process, students "start to discover that their own identities do not have to be constructed by a media culture of mass consumerism" (Wyatt & Silva 4). Instead, their identities remain under their own control. By looking at both the representations and the gaps within them, students are "empowered by a queer reading practice and eventually learn to demand more tangible representations of the queer experience" (Lipton 176). This is one of the ultimate goals of this blended pedagogy—to get students invested in the representations that populate the media so that they can assist in not only changing the representation but also how people view nonnormative behavior.

APPLYING QUEER PEDAGOGIES & MEDIA LITERACIES TO *STEVEN UNIVERSE*

One way to approach this blended pedagogy is by utilizing a popular piece of media that is a part of popular culture. As Anna Creadick states, "When popular culture enters the classroom, students' lives can merge with their studies, and the effect is powerful" (16). By allowing students to bring in the popular culture-based media that they are drawn to, they become more invested in their investigations. Furthermore, queer youth tend to describe their interaction with popular culture and media as "a kind of code cracking. The queer imagination shifts from a process of creative construction to an active process of finding the right clues. For many queer youth, the veracity of some popular culture only comes to light when their reading provides some glimpse into a queer world" (Lipton 177). All students are able to learn how to engage in this code cracking process by interacting with popular culture. Both students and instructors learn how to read for queerness, looking specifically for the areas where representations are nonnormative in terms of sexuality or gender. In turn, this allows students to investigate why societal norms are reinforced along with the beliefs and assumptions that form the foundation for those norms.

With this blended pedagogical approach, it begs the question of what this would look like in practice. An example blended pedagogical approach is *Steven Universe*. This show focuses on Steven, the main protagonist who is half human and half gem. In the show, gems are a type of alien race that has attempted to colonize Earth for its natural resources. However, Steven's mother, Rose Quartz, and her loyal followers defended Earth, resulting in them being labeled as traitors. The various episodes trace Steven's growth as he learns what it means to be both human and gem while being mentored by his mother's followers, named the Crystal Gems. At this point, it is crucial to note that the alien race of gems has no inherent gender or sex. Instead, they take on human form, which carries with it the physical markers of both gender and sex. Within the characters and their interactions with one another, normative behaviors and identities are queered, resulting in the kind of pedagogical tool that allows for discussion of queer identity in combination with media studies.

Steven and Non-Normative Masculinity

In the show, Steven is a pre-teen who is a normative cisgender heterosexual male. Yet, Steven's heteronormative representation becomes complicated by his depiction of masculinity. Steven's weapons and the powers he wields deviate from cultural norms concerning masculinity. The powers Steven uses to fight his enemies are defensive rather than offensive-based, as he uses a pink shield with roses on it. These societally normative feminine weapons (and colors) queer his representation of masculinity. Additionally, his power of "bubbling" is also defensive-based. In an early episode in the first season of the show, Steven discovers he can create "bubbles" that surround him in order to protect him and those near him, namely Connie, a female friend. This problematizes the representation of masculinity as it is both normative and nonnormative. On the one hand, the focus on Steven as a purely defensive character is nonnormative for masculinity but the action of protecting a girl is not, leaving Steven a problematic representation of queered masculinity that is ripe for students to analyze.

Steven has another power, which is the ability to create sentient life, both by accident and purposely. In the season one episode "Watermelon Steven," Steven discovers that he can create life with his spit. After eating watermelon and spitting out the seeds, a massive farm of Steven-shaped watermelons appears, resulting in Steven exclaiming "Holy watermelon! Is this? Can it be? They're me! They're all me!" ("Watermelon Steven"). Steven's confusion is immediately answered by Pearl, another gem, who explains, "Your mother had the power to grow sentient plant life to act as her defenders" ("Watermelon Steven"). Steven has inherited his mother's power of giving life. The act of giving any form of life is considered to be the domain of biological females; therefore, to give this power to Steven complicates his masculinity and identity. Furthermore, this is further problematized by the fact that he can only create life from existing items, namely vegetation. With this in mind, it becomes clear that Steven's power involves the ability to provide intelligence to various vegetation in order for it to fight for and protect him. Steven's life-giving powers do not include free will, but are more akin to breeding soldiers, resulting in both masculine and feminine elements.

Steven's comfort and flexibility when it comes to his own masculinity also places him in a queer space. In particular, Steven engages in what would be considered cross-dressing for a performance in his home town. In the episode "Sadie's Song" in season 2, Steven wears a skirt and cropped top along with face make-up, glitter, and high heels while singing and dancing. During Steven's performance, the audience cheers, obviously excited and entertained, and one audience member remarks that this "had Steven's name written all over it" ("Sadie's Song"), demonstrating that Steven's behavior and performance is not considered strange by the audience. The characters in the show "make no mention of his heels and makeup, treating his drag costume as just another aspect of Steven's performance" (Dunn 46). Steven's performance reveals a certain playfulness in terms of gender expectations. On the surface, this is a positive representation of the freedom of cross-dressing, particularly for a cisgender and heterosexual male. However, Steven's overall character provides a very queer representation of masculinity. While Steven is notably male with an opposite-gender attraction to a female character named Connie, his attributes are decidedly more feminine.

Pearl and the Complications of Sexuality

In addition, the character Pearl is also problematically queer but with a focus on representations of sexuality and gender norms. As the show progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious that Pearl is sexually attracted to a fellow gem, Rose Quartz, who also physically manifests as a human female. However, Rose Quartz does not share Pearl's feelings, and instead has a child, Steven, with Greg. In the season three episode titled "Mr. Greg," Pearl explicitly reveals her feelings towards Rose Quartz through song, resulting in the first time these feelings are brought to the forefront in an explicit manner. During her song, Pearl explains,

> I was fine with the men who would come into her life now and again. I was fine 'cause I knew that they didn't really matter, until you [Greg]. I was fine when you came, and we fought like it was all some silly game. Over her, who she'd chosen. After all those years, I never thought I'd lose. [. . .] Who am I now in this world without her. ("Mr. Greg")

Pearl alludes to men that came before, revealing that they were short term interactions that never lasted, and, because of this, Pearl could tolerate them. However, the fact that Pearl experiences these emotions when other men enter Rose Quartz's life illuminates an interest beyond friendship. Furthermore, the fact that Pearl and Greg engaged in fights about who Rose Quartz would choose illustrates a romantic attachment.

This representation of Pearl is queered when taken in the context of contemporary representations of same-sex attraction within popular culture. Susan Driver argues, "a girl's queer transgressions commonly reinforce, rather than disrupt, her development into a normal woman. In other words, elusive signs of gender and sexual variance become framed in terms of a privileged and inevitable heterosexual resolution" (7). While Pearl is not human, manifesting as a female subjects her to the same expectations and gender norms of any

human girl. However, the show does not depict Pearl's queerness in the same way Driver argues that media and popular culture does. Instead, Pearl's attraction to and love for Rose Quartz is depicted as permanent as opposed to a stepping stone towards her eventual heterosexual identity. In fact, Pearl develops an attraction towards a human pink-haired woman, in a later season, further demonstrating that Pearl's sexuality is not a passing moment in her development, but a legitimate and innate part of her identity.

Pearl's actions and mannerisms counter what society views as feminine, as Pearl's weapons are a spear and a sword, which she uses when she acts as a knight to Rose Quartz. In the episode "Sworn to the Sword," the show uses a flashback to depict Pearl in action in the midst of a battle with enemy gems. The enemy gems are larger than Pearl, yet she charges into battle without any concern for herself, wielding either her sword or her spear. While there is no dialogue to this flashback, it is Pearl's actions that illustrate her queerness regarding femininity. While Steven is decidedly a defense-based fighter, Pearl is completely offensive. Eli Dunn argues, "Gems have bodies that they are able to change at will, and this magical ability to mutate their bodies makes the standard feminine features that they often display less important in defining their gender" (45). By making the gems an alien race, the show demonstrates that femininity and the definitions that accompany it are simply illusions that can be taken on by anyone—or anything, in this case.

Shapeshifting and Fusion: Physical Fluidity and Trans Bodies

Amethyst, a fellow gem, regularly uses her power of shape shifting to become something or someone else to mock those around her, further queering gendered behavior. Like the other gems, Amethyst does not have a sex but choses to manifest in a traditionally feminine fashion. Yet, it is with Amethyst that the show narrows in on demonstrating the fluidity of the gendered body. In an early episode, Amethyst shape shifts into her wrestling alter-ego, Purple Puma, who is male and is referred to with traditionally masculine (that is, he/him) pronouns. Dunn is correct when she argues,

> If the male body that she [Amethyst] takes on as Purple Puma is a performance, it implicates her normal appearance as a kind of costume as well. Her appearance as male is no less performance, costume, or construct than her normally female-gendered body. Any appearance she may choose to wear becomes performance. (46)

By creating and utilizing these characters whose bodies are simply constructs, the show is engaging in a larger discussion of gender as a performance. The point made with these characters, particularly Amethyst in this case, is that the concepts of normative and non-normative are not just constructs; they are also fluid.

Each of the gems is able to take part in fusion, which is the physical blending of two gems, which can be understood as a trans body. Garnet explains fusion as needing "a gem at the core of your being. Then you need a body that can turn into light. Then you need a partner you can trust with that light" ("The Answer"). Garnet is, perhaps, the best character to explain fusion as she is the result of the fusion between the gems Ruby and Sapphire. In the episode "The Answer," Garnet retells the story of how she became a fusion, and essentially came into being, through narration and flashback. Garnet explains how it feels to be fused: "I feel lost, and scared, and happy. Why am I so sure that I'd rather be this than everything I was supposed to be, and that I'd rather do this than anything I was supposed to do?" ("The Answer"). For Garnet, this fused state feels natural and is how she is meant to feel. When reading this as a representation of trans bodies, Garnet's response finds a concrete foundation on which to stand.

Yet the initial fusion elicits both positive and negative reactions from other characters, complicating this representation of fused (trans) bodies. The other gems who witness Ruby and Sapphire's initial fusion react with nothing short of disgust and repulsion as various gems exclaim, "Unbelievable! Disgusting! This is unheard of!" ("The Answer"). As Garnet's narration illustrates, the various gems who had witnessed the fusion had never before seen the fusion of two different gems, only of gems of the same type. In essence,

this is an issue of normative versus non-normative behaviour, as the expectation is to fuse only with the same gem, such as a ruby with a ruby or a sapphire with a sapphire. For a sapphire to fuse with a ruby is to engage in a non-normative or queer interaction and relationship, which has drastic consequences, as it is announced that Ruby "will be broken for this" ("The Answer"). For the gems, being "broken" is the equivalent of death for a human; therefore, the punishment for breaking from the norms of their society is death. Yet, there are those characters who do not view fusion in such a harsh and negative light. Upon encountering Rose Quartz, Garnet fearfully asks if she upsets Rose, to which Rose Quartz replies "Who cares about how I feel? How you feel is bound to be much more interesting" ("The Answer"). Instead of disgust, there is an interest and focus on Garnet as a new gem. In this interaction, the nonnormative relationship between Ruby and Sapphire is a typical relationship, not one that is viewed as queer by Rose Quartz.

Fusion as a concept also reveals yet another queer element within the show, especially in relation to Steven and who can fuse with him. While the gems can only fuse with other gems, Steven is able to fuse with both gems and humans due to his mixed heritage. This becomes crucial to the queerness that is apparent throughout the show when Steven fuses with his best friend, Connie, creating a new person named Stevonnie. The creation of Stevonnie becomes a complex arena for queer investigation for two main reasons: the first being that Stevonnie is created from a human male and female, resulting in a fusion that is neither. Dunn has understood Stevonnie, and fusion characters in general, as representations of trans bodies, arguing that the show's "interaction with trans representation relies on separating gender identity from sexual orientation, physical sex characteristics, and gender presentation in the mind of its viewers" (45). This becomes most clearly represented in the fused Stevonnie, as the physical depiction of the fusion is neither female nor male, resulting in Stevonnie being completely separated from the categories that Dunn outlines.

Additionally, the ways in which Stevonnie interacts with other people in town reveals how fusion is treated, just as the other gems' reactions to Garnet illustrate views concerning societal norms. Stevonnie first visits a donut shop where two people, a male and a female, are working. Both workers exhibit visual signs of attraction, from blushing to stammering to giving away food. However, Dunn argues, "Whether these expressions of nervousness around Stevonnie are from attraction to Stevonnie or from a confused reaction to their ambiguously gendered body is not entirely clear, but it is clear that the interaction both of them have with Stevonnie is uncomfortable" (53). While it true that their reactions can stem from their confusion regarding Stevonnie's gender, I would contend that such reactions are mainly due to an attraction to Stevonnie, which may or may not cause them to become confused. Furthermore, it is their attraction to Stevonnie that demonstrates the strange attraction that the fused body engenders.

This type of reaction continues to arise when Stevonnie attends a dance where they become the focus of fellow dancer, Kevin's, attention. In this scene, it becomes increasingly apparent that Kevin's advances are not welcome, causing Stevonnie to feel uncomfortable in their fused body. Kevin continually refers to Stevonnie as "baby" and attempts to pull them back onto the dance floor. Stevonnie ultimately agrees to dance once more then asserts, "And it's Stevonnie; I am not your baby" ("The Answer"). After this, they begin to dance in an aggressive manner, demonstrating their anger and lack of comfort within this situation. Dunn correctly notes, "Stevonnie's interaction with Kevin at the dance is one in which they are sexualized, even despite their protests" (54). The discomfort caused by Kevin's sexualization of Stevonnie causes them to break apart, or un-fuse. Their experience as a fusion, or trans body, was so toxic that it could not be sustained, demonstrating the existing social stigma that surrounds such bodies. However, it is clear from Garnet's experience with being a fusion that the trans body can and should be accepted.

THE PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTION OF *STEVEN UNIVERSE*

Steven Universe provides materials through which students can engage with queerness and queer youth cultures by utilizing media literacy and queer pedagogy. None of the representations within the show are perfect, as each can be problematized depending on how viewers interpret each character. This is the goal of the investigation—to recognize how media representations of different types of people, particularly those involving a degree of queerness, are neither negative nor positive, but a combination of both. With queer pedagogy, instructors are offered "a way to conceptualize and interrogate strategies of normalization by attending to the cultural production of knowledge in order to understand and, ideally, to push beyond the places 'where thinking stops' within and between diverse discourse communities" (Winans 117). Winans argues that the place "where thinking stops" is the area where students reach a block in their ability to articulate their understanding and opinions on various media representations. This is the area where true investigation and the acquisition of knowledge occurs, which is true for a variety of higher education courses, not only for media studies classes. For *Steven Universe*, this space occurs when the students begin looking at the representations beyond the surface and begin to ask questions that problematize the characters.

Investigating the various gem-based characters in the show requires a focus on queer theory and pedagogy as the gems take on human forms but are, nonetheless, not human. In one of the few papers written on this show since its creation, Eli Dunn investigates the queerness in the show, arguing, "representations of queer characters in children's cartoons have been mostly confined to lesbian or gay characters, and these relationships often downplayed or unconfirmed. *Steven Universe* is radically breaking that tradition apart by being willing to give voice to other, less often represented queer identities" (44). *Steven Universe*, as well as Cartoon Network, are expanding their representations of what it is to be queer, which allows for an increasingly wide-reaching discussion of media representations and what those representations mean for queer identity.

One key area students could investigate is the fact that *Steven Universe* is a children's show that openly depicts queer characters and themes. These representations, taken in conjunction with its genre, opens a discussion of the appropriate themes for intended audiences. *Steven Universe* uses "its specific kind of narrative magic in a variety of ways to teach and entertain its young audience" (Dunn 55). Dunn illustrates the framing of the show as one that is created for children for a specific reason: "Children's shows, and children themselves, are willing to suspend disbelief and open themselves to possibilities that are not fully culturally accepted, and they are less socially conditioned to be biased against experiences or people that are new to them" (55-56). By basing these themes and queer characters within a children's genre, they reach an audience that is arguably more willing to accept and understand what they are viewing and then internalize it. This, on a basic level, comprises the attempt to normalize queerness and incorporate it into what is socially normative.

Yet this striving towards the normalization of queerness raises its own set of complications for the queer community. One key problematic result of this normalization is that it sterilizes queerness, which is especially true with representations of queer sexuality. Susan Driver expresses this so clearly by writing:

> What is especially disturbing is an almost complete silence surrounding queer youth sexual pleasures, subcultural counter publics, and political resistance. Normalization works to desexualize and depoliticize youth once again, creating safe, sanitized images that conform with white middle-class standards of visibility and value. (5)

This normalization occurs when characters are referred to as queer but in a manner which does not challenge any societal norms. They must remain in the box created by this new normative form of queerness.

Steven Universe's attempt to shed light on queerness may have been done with the best of intentions in mind. Yet, as Driver argues, "Even the most well-meaning attempts to help queer youth often fall prey to patronizing efforts to impose 'healthy' normative ideals on youth in order to simplify their complexities

for the sake of mainstream recognition" (5). Additionally, Driver continues with, "Empowerment becomes a sign of fitting into familiar and nonthreatening models of identity and belonging" (5). This is a pitfall that instructors need to avoid, as discussions surrounding representations of queer identity are problematized by even the most well-meaning of instructors. This becomes a space where generalized terms of "healthy" or "unhealthy," which can easily be switched for the terms normative and non-normative, becomes ineffective. Students need to be the ones who investigate not only these categories, but also what is included in each, and why certain individuals or forms of behavior are added into those categories. This can be based on cultural or societal expectations as well as the student's own beliefs, which can be, and possibly are, intertwined to a certain extent.

Even with this risk, the benefits of this approach along with *Steven Universe* serving as a focal point are numerous, particularly for the queer youth that can and do populate our classrooms. Lipton explains, "Positive representations of queer life confirm an individual's existence and provide empowerment, and freedom from oppression. But more, the process of interpreting texts introduces to queer youth the notion of taking control of the political climate to decide who is or can be queer" (Lipton 176). There really is no perfect positive representation of queerness or queer life as any representation contains issues or problem areas that arguably reveal more than the positive portrayals. With that said, these representations allow students to become involved with influencing the way queerness is depicted in the media, which then, in turn, influences how queerness is viewed by society. After all, queer pedagogy "depends on recognizing that the world outside the classroom and the strategies of normalization that operate there must be considered as we conceptualize our classroom approaches: thus, a queer pedagogy is, by definition, always impacted by the local" (Winans 107). These classroom discussions must not end once the students leave the confined bubble of the classroom, but instead, students should be bringing what they gain from these discussions into their personal worlds.

OTHER USES OF *STEVEN UNIVERSE*

This mixture of media literacy and queer pedagogy does not need to be confined to queerness in terms of sexuality or gender. Instead, it can be expanded to discuss class and race, as popular media contains representations of these as well. Queer pedagogy often goes beyond discussing sexual orientation or gender to discussing anything that is non-normative. According to Wendy Wyatt and Kumi Silva, "the media's portrayal of age, class, ethnicity, and gender-- together with the claims that accompany these portrayals-- are crucial to confront as students integrate themselves into a social system and form identities of their own" (11). It is not only sexuality and gender that inform identity, but also the existence and interrogation of these categories as well. When bringing these aspects into the classroom, *Steven Universe* remains an opportune tool to use, especially with the other possible areas of focus within the show including the class hierarchy within the gem world. Certain types of gems are higher up in power than others, with a key example being that diamonds are the heads of this community of individuals. This ties in both class and race, as the various gems are also divided up and classified by color. In order to fully articulate the possible future classroom inclusion of class and race, it is necessary to pull in an example from *Steven Universe* to demonstrate its far-reaching benefits.

In the episode "Back to the Barn," Pearl's interaction with another gem named Peridot, reminds Pearl of the class expectations placed on being a 'pearl' gem. Peridot remarks, "She's a pearl. She's a made-to-order servant just like the hundreds of other pearls being flaunted around back on Homeworld" ("Back to"). *Steven Universe* interacts with both race and class by using these magical and fictional characters. Peridot's comment refers to Pearl being one of many, implying the same type of rhetoric that Western culture employs about race. The other comment about being a "made-to-order servant" implies class to the point that the rest of the gem population view pearls as a lower class, perhaps similar to the working class. After this comment, Peridot asks

who Pearl belongs to, to which Pearl replies that she belongs to no one. Peridot's response illustrates the class dynamic occurring in the show: "Well, you can belong to me for now. Ha! A peridot with a pearl—what would they say back home?" ("Back to"). Not only is there the element of class, but also of ownership of one another because pearls are material possession to be bought, sold, and traded by those of a higher class.

CONCLUSION

Taking the blended pedagogical approach of both media literacies and queer pedagogy allows students to engage with their identities, and the identities of others, in a critical manner. Critical thinking should be a primary goal of education and by incorporating popular culture, students are able to investigate the world and media messages around them. While there are pitfalls to any pedagogical approach, with this particular approach, the benefits outweigh the potential drawbacks as it opens these types of discourse in a variety of higher education courses, such as composition and media study classes. It also provides a way to introduce and discuss marginalized identities, resulting in a more inclusive learning environment. Utilizing a popular television show such as *Steven Universe* allows students to engage with something that is both aimed at children and set in a fantastical world, yet is also rich with problematic queer representations. By investigating these representations and understanding the thought processes behind them, students will become active consumers and creators of future media that will help advance queer representations.

For this type of work, *Steven Universe* provides a lush landscape in which to start. The show's characters are problematic in their depictions of both normative and nonnormative behavior, allowing students to analyze and discuss these representations. The interactions between the characters also allow for a space for students to not only discuss these representations, but also to analyze them in relation to their potential influences in the real world. *Steven Universe* allows for students to analyze identities and representations in a way that interacts with their own sense of themselves and other people. It forces them to consider how they view the world and themselves, resulting in students who are increasingly critical of the media that is presented to them.

WORKS CITED

Allen, Lousia. "Queer Pedagogy and the Limits of Thought: Teaching Sexualities at University." *Higher Education Research and Development* vol. 34, no. 4, 2015, pp. 763-775.

"Alone Together." *Steven Universe*. Cartoon Network, CN, January 2015.

"The Answer." *Steven Universe*. Cartoon Network, CN, January 2016.

"Back to the Barn." *Steven Universe*. Cartoon Network, CN, October 2015.

Coll, Leanne & Emma Charlton. "Not yet queer, here and now for sexualities and Schooling." *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society, and Learning* vol. 18, no. 3, 2018, pp. 307-320

Creadick, Anna. "Everybody's Doing It: Teaching Popular Culture." *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* vol. 24, no. 1-2, 2014, pp. 15- 24

Driver, Susan. "Introducing Queer Youth Cultures." *Queer Youth Culture*, State University of NY Press, 2008, pp.1-18.

Dunn, Eli. "Steven Universe, Fusion Magic, and the Queer Cartoon Carnivalesque." *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* vol. 56, 2015, pp. 44-57.

Lipton, Mark. "Queer Readings of Popular Culture: Searching [to] Out the Subtext." *Queer Youth Culture*, State University of NY Press, 2008, pp. 163-180.

"Mr. Greg." *Steven Universe*. Cartoon Network, CN, July 2016.

Kemmit, Alicia. "Critically Reading Race in the Media and in the Classroom." *Rethinking Media Education: Critical Pedagogy and Identity Politics*, Hampton Press, 2007, pp. 167-178.

"Sadie's Song." *Steven Universe*. Cartoon Network, CN, September 2015.

Scharrer, Erica. "Closer than You Think: Bridging the Gap Between Media Effects and Cultural Studies in Media Education Theory and Practice." *Rethinking Media Education: Critical Pedagogy and Identity Politics*, Hampton Press, 2007, pp. 17-36.

"Watermelon Steven." *Steven Universe*. Cartoon Network, CN, November 2014.

"We Need to Talk." *Steven Universe*, Cartoon Network, CN, June 2015

Wyatt, Wendy and Kumi Silva. "Reviving a Culture-Debating Public through Media Education." *Rethinking Media Education: Critical Pedagogy and Identity Politics*, Hampton Press, 2007, pp. 1-16.

Winans, Amy. E. "Queering Pedagogy in the English Classroom: Engaging with the Places Where Thinking Stops." *Pedagogy* vol. 6, no. 1, 2006, pp. 103-122.

AUTHOR BIO

Misty Thomas received her BA in English and MA in Literature from the University of New Mexico. She is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of New Mexico in the Rhetoric and Writing Program. She focuses on feminist critical discourse analysis, social media, popular culture and queer theory.

SUGGESTED CITATION

APA

Thomas, M. (2019). "I am a conversation:" Media literacy, queer pedagogy, and *Steven Universe* in college curriculum. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy. 6*(3). http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-3/i-am-a-conversation-media-literacy-queer-pedagogy-and-steven-universe-in-college-curriculum/

MLA

Thomas, Misty. "'I am a Conversation:' Media Literacy, Queer Pedagogy, and *Steven Universe* in College Curriculum." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy,* vol. 6, no. 3, 2019. http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-3/i-am-a-conversation-media-literacy-queer-pedagogy-and-steven-universe-in-college-curriculum/