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„From Manotaurs to Pink Lions:
Gendered Behavior of Boys and Men in US-American Cartoons of the 2010s"

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Table of Contents

1. **Introduction** **1**
2. **The Concept of Boyhood** **3**
3. **Men and Masculinity** **10**
   3.1. Toxic Masculinity 11
   3.2. Hard-Bodied Heroes 15
   3.3. Rational Masculinity 18
4. ***Gravity Falls*** **20**
   4.1. Dipper and Mabel Pines 22
   4.2. Toxic Masculinity 24
   4.3. Rivalry and Competition 29
   4.4. Role Models and Authority Figures 35
      4.4.1. Grunkle Stan 37
      4.4.2. Soos 38
      4.4.3. Grunkle Ford 39
   4.5. Heroic Masculinity 41
   4.6. Emotional Growth 44
   4.7. Diverse Masculinities 47
      4.7.1. Latino Characters 47
      4.7.2. Homosexuality 49
   4.8. Devious Masculinity 50
   4.9. Summary 54
5. ***Steven Universe*** **55**
   5.1. Body 58
   5.2. Heroic Masculinity 60
   5.3. Traditional Masculinity 64
   5.4. Feminine Themes 68
      5.4.1. The Power of Love 69
      5.4.2. Steven's Gem Powers 72
   5.5. Steven's Guardians 74
   5.6. Summary 77
6. **Conclusion** **78**
7. **Bibliography** **84**
   7.1. Primary Sources 84
      7.1.1. Gravity Falls 84
      7.1.2. Steven Universe 85
      7.1.3. Other Media Sources 86
         7.1.3.1. Feature Films 86
         7.1.3.2. Television Series 86
   7.2. Secondary Sources 86
8. **Appendix** **90**
   8.1. English Abstract 90
   8.2. German Abstract 91

1. Introduction

Traditional masculinity has long been associated with aggression, violent competition, bullying, and an avoidance of vulnerability and tender emotions. And so has traditional boyhood.

Since the 1990s and 2000s, boys have reportedly been in crisis. One side of the discussion argues that our society's focus on girls and women is hurting boys, that feminism is emasculating them. We, they argue, need to make sure that at the end, boys will still be boys (Sommer qtd. in Wannamaker 2-3). The other side rails against these accusations and insists that boys are just as sensitive as girls and that traditional masculinity is what really ruins them (Kindlon and Thompson 77-78).

Caught up in this argument are discussions about our contemporary media landscape. Children spend many hours per week watching television. So much so, that some scholars have called it a "public school," in which children pick up most of their cultural beliefs (qtd. in Wooden and Gillam ix). If we want to understand what kind of values and ideologies are imparted to our children, we need to examine closely the media content they consume. What, then, are children's programs teaching boys about gender? Is the masculinity of boys and men onscreen too violent and aggressive? Too soft and emotional? Is it misogynistic, homophobic, racist? Or too inclusive and tolerant?

Despite its ubiquity in children's programming, very little academic work has analyzed animated media content, especially when it comes to gender, and even more narrowly, the gendered behavior of boys and men. On the rare occasion that it has, it mostly examines feature-length movies, but not cartoons aired on television (or streamed on the Internet and consumed on various mobile devices). To shed some light onto the gendered behavior of male characters in contemporary children's programs, this thesis will analyze two US-American cartoons of the 2010s. But first a note on my own ideological bias.

In boyhood studies, there has been a resurgence of essentialist views of gender. Boys are regarded as innately predisposed or biologically wired to be wild, aggressive rascals (Golden 195). Bullying is just in their nature, the essentialist asserts.

Underpinning the thesis at hand, however, is a constructivist view of gender. Rather than viewing gender as an essentialist category, this paper subscribes to Judith But-

ler's account of gender as a performative act: "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). Gender only comes into existence by being performed. It is the 'regulatory practices' of society that give gendered behavior its perceived coherence by aligning certain aspects, traits and behaviors with masculinity, and others with femininity, and conflate masculinity with men, as well as femininity with women (24). Society naturalizes these alignments to a point where it becomes difficult to see these processes and constructions for what they are.

Furthermore, if boys have to be taught how to be 'real men,' as a familiar media trope would have it, then men, like women, are not born but made (Beauvoir 330) and do not have a monopoly on masculinity. They are not 'naturally' anything. Both masculinity and femininity are traits and behaviors present in men as well as women (Habermas 2). Therefore, this thesis will study the gendered behavior of *male characters*, rather than masculinity per se. The main focus will be on how these cartoons reiterate, undermine, or outright challenge traditional notions like 'boys don't cry' or 'boys will be boys.' The latter can be regarded as the dominant concept of boyhood in the United States and will be discussed in section 2. Section 3 will then take a look at toxic masculinity and venture into aspects such as heroic masculinity and its celebration of the body, as well as the interplay between reason and masculinity. Sections 4 and 5 will offer an analysis of US-American cartoons of the 2010s.

Given the limited scope of this paper, I will focus on only two popular cartoons in detail, namely *Gravity Falls* and *Steven Universe,* and only broaden the discussion to include other cartoons in the conclusion of the paper. These shows have been selected because of their similar genres (i.e. a hybrid formation typical of children's programming with elements of action, adventure, fantasy, comedy, and drama) and because they feature young, male protagonists. Dipper Pines and the eponymous Steven Universe are both 12-year-old boys facing supernatural wonders and threats and are actively engaged in saving the world.

Their gendered behavior, however, could not be more different. Dipper Pines is surrounded by toxic masculinity; peers and adults alike continuously ridicule him for his lack of bravery, his unathletic body, his emotionality. Much of the humor of the show

is derived from gender performance, either through exaggerations thereof or the clear nonconformity to traditional gender concepts.
Steven Universe, on the other hand, performs nontraditional gendered behavior and is never punished for it. He is an emotionally sensitive and overweight boy, who is represented as completely at ease in his own skin. His supernatural powers carry the connotation of femininity, which is not presented as a problem or something to be ashamed of. At the same time, he is very active and wants to save the world alongside his female guardians, thus incorporating both masculine and feminine traits.
Before we dive any further into the analysis and evaluation of these characters, however, we will first have to establish a theoretical basis for the discussion.

2. The Concept of Boyhood

When studying notions of boyhood one thing soon becomes apparent: from the 19th century onward there has been one dominant concept of boyhood in the United States. And that is the view that 'boys will be boys.' There are variations of the theme, but they can all be linked to this very idea that boys are innately aggressive, competitive and animalistic.
When scholars and psychologists try to contest this concept, they amass evidence that real boys either do not fit the concept or are actively hurt by it. They show that boys are as emotional and sensitive as girls until patriarchal masculinity gets its hooks into them (Kindlon and Thompson 77-78). Furthermore, they try to loosen the concept's hold on our institutions—be it schools, medical institutions or the media. However, 'boys will be boys' seems to be reluctant to disappear.
The conversation about representations in the media also takes place in the persistent shadow of 'boys will be boys.' The judgment and analysis of boys on the page and onscreen is often based on their proximity to this concept, no matter whether said proximity is endorsed or opposed by the individual scholar. What makes this issue more complex is that notions of boyhood are often entangled with views on childhood, as well as adult masculinity (for the latter, see section 3 of this paper).
Before the 19th century, boyhood as such received little attention. Instead, it was the broader and more general subject of childhood that scholars have made the focus of their studies. Unfortunately, the studies of boyhood and childhood have not always

been critically differentiated. More specifically, aspects of boyhood have historically been taken to inform the analysis of childhood in general. Calvert notes that “scholars have simply mixed evidence about boys and girls or extrapolated from one to the other to produce a monolithic history of childhood for any given era” (75). Unfortunately, gender is not the only category confusing the issue. Aspects such as age, socioeconomic status, or race have also been disregarded. The ‘monolithic history of childhood’ never talks about specific children, but evokes a timeless, abstract category that paints every child with the same brush. The study of boyhood, too, runs into similar problems and has only begun to investigate boys in their diversity (see, for example, Way and Chu). Wannamaker puts it succinctly when she argues that the rhetoric in the US declares boyhood to be natural and universal, but at the same time “distinctly masculine, heterosexual, white, Western, upper or middle class, [and] Christian” (37). Despite these weak points, the concepts under discussion inform not only educational, legal and medical policies, they also pepper our media landscape. It is therefore important to investigate them more closely.

Children in pre-industrial society were seen as both the property of their parents and as miniature adults. They worked alongside their families as soon as they were able to operate tools and took on apprenticeships before reaching the tender age of ten. They shared the same space and the same traditions as their parents and were generally regarded in terms of what they could achieve (or what could be achieved *with* them) for their families (Spigel 111, Kline 97). We can still see traces of this view in familiar media tropes that call boys the men of the house in the absence of their fathers or teach pre-adolescent boys to act like ‘real men.’

Before the 18th century, young children were also taken to be closer to animals than humans. They were caught “between upright humanity and the beasts of the field” and needed tutelage to reach rationality and enlightenment (Calvert 70). As time went on, the comparison to the ‘beasts of the field’ dissolved. It is unclear whether this notion has survived as a particular aspect of boyhood, or whether it was the perceived behavior of boys this engendered the view of childhood in the first place.

By the 1800s, childhood was starting to transform into something precious, something to be cherished. It was seen as a time of “essential preparation for life” and a “healthy natural state of freedom before the constraints of civilization” (Calvert 79). At

the same time, adults began to cultivate values such as “submission, obedience, and docility” in their children (Seiter 312). Children were “pre-social” (James 400) or “unformed and undeveloped” (Goldin 138), neutral clay to be formed by parents and educators alike, rather than young human beings with their own agency, and could therefore be molded according to their parents’ wishes. Spigel calls this the “tabula rasa conception of the child” (111), a blank slate waiting to be inscribed. If children can be inscribed with any notion whatsoever, one has to make sure they are inscribed in the right way.

Children were now firmly believed to be innocent and pure. They had to be protected from the corrupting forces of adult society (Ariès 56), were passive beings with no wants of their own (Jenkins 4) and more akin to angels than beasts. Childhood was seen as a period free of struggle and pain, often compared to the Garden of Eden, and something to be cherished (Calvert 79).

Even today we still want to protect the innocence of our children, whether it is from violent video games, too much television, or atrocities committed by strangers. At the same time, however, we need them to be informed as to reduce the chance of them getting into dangerous situations in the first place. In a way, innocence has become a weakness: “in a world of latchkey children, illicit drugs, terrifying new illnesses, and the horrors of child molestation, innocence has become a vulnerability. The uninformed child is the child at risk. The protected child is […] the child who can cope successfully in the adult world” (Calvert 79). Children are taught to be careful, to guard *themselves* against the dangers noted here by Calvert. When one thinks of boys not as *boys* but as *children*, they too are innocent and pure. Only when looking at the peculiarities of boyhood, do the differences to girlhood and the notion of ‘boys will be boys’ or ‘boys don’t cry’ come into play.

As mentioned above, this idea can be traced back to the 19th century. Both extremes, that of childhood innocence as well as that of boyhood aggression find their explicit expression at the same time. Rotundo identifies an entire separate boy culture, even a “race of boys”, based on “rivalry, division, and conflict”, in which boys are full of “energy, self-assertion, noise, and a frequent resort to violence” (342-44). In this world, it was (and still is) crucial to suppress weaknesses, lest they are used by other boys, who are just as savage, against oneself. It all came down to the mastery

of emotions. Pain, fear, grief, affection—any kind of emotional vulnerability—had to be suppressed (Rotundo 348). Today, boys and men are taught a similar maxim, namely that they “should bottle up most of their feelings. That anger or aggression may sometimes be permissible for some men in certain situations, but that vulnerability is strictly off-limits because it’s been culturally associated with weakness” (McIntosh, “Emotional Expression” [00:04:47-00:05:01]). Boys do not cry, not in the 19th century and not now.

Digging deeper, Kidd identifies two intersecting notions at the core of our contemporary view of boyhood: the ‘boy-savage’ and the ‘feral tale’. They stem from different traditions but came together to inform psychoanalysis and have seeped deeply into our culture and especially our medical and therapeutic practices (Kidd 14).

Boys were often compared by writers of the 19th century to the perceived ‘savagery’ of Native Americans and other indigenous people. Not all of it was a negative comparison, however. Boys were praised for their vitality and free spirit, if not for their cruelty (Kidd 14). The savagery was seen as a natural stage in the development of boys: “[...] the lesson this creature’s career is usually taken to impart is about white, middle-class male’s perilous passage from nature to culture, from bestiality to humanity, from homosocial pack life to individual self-reliance and heterosexual prowess—that is, from boyhood to manhood” (Kidd 7). Boys had to pass through the stage of savagery on their way to manhood and the task of society was to tame and civilize said savagery.

The feral tale, on the other hand, denotes cases of children that have been raised in isolation from other human beings and have not been taught human behavior, such as Kasper Hauser or Victor of Aveyron. Whereas the savagery in boys was seen as a natural state for boys, feral boys were cast as the frightening cultural Other that needed to be contained and managed (Kidd 16). The feral tale especially finds ample expressions in our media landscape. Well-known literary figures such as Tarzan and Mowgli, both stories of boys being raised by animals, still enjoy much popularity, the latter having been re-told twice just in the past few of years in Andy Serkis’ *Mowgli: Legend of the Jungle* and Jon Favreau’s *The Jungle Book*. The feral tale even makes it into one of the cartoons to be discussed below, *Gravity Falls*, in which the

former mayor of the town was raised in the woods by bears ("The Stanchurian Candidate").

What has survived from both the feral tale and the boy-savage until today, is the view that boys are innately wild. Even though they have to surpass this wildness in order to become adults, the expression of savagery during their childhood is natural. Boys will be boys.

By the early 20th century, the 'feminization of society' was seen as a real problem (Kimmel, *Manhood* 276). Women were increasingly in charge of socializing and 'domesticating' boys and many men feared that they would turn out to be less manly for it. Efforts were made to rescue boys from the influence of women, which led to the founding of the Boy Scouts, as well as a proliferation of fraternities and same-sex education in order to create safe spaces for the expression and nurturance of masculinity (Kimmel, *Manhood* 169). Men had to ascertain that boys did not grow up weak and that they learned how to behave like real men.

This perceived crisis makes a return whenever masculinity is felt to be under attack. In the late 60s and 70s, it was a reaction to second-wave feminism that reportedly threw boys into crisis. Masculinity was now widely regarded as a burden, girls received all of our society's attention and schools were turning boys into 'wimps' (Kimmel, *Manhood* 276, 280). As society hastened to combat sexism, the needs of boys and men were no longer met (Nathanson and Young 173). Each crisis once again perpetuates the language of boy savagery and connects boys firmly with aggression and stoicism.

The most current 'boy-crisis' has been debated since the 1990s. Studies show that girls outperform boys in school, especially when it comes to reading and writing, and that boys are more likely to drop out. Boys commit a higher percentage of crimes, but also suicides, and are more likely to be diagnosed with ADD and medicated from a young age (Kidd 170, Bettis and Sternod 27). Some of the more cynical scholars question these statistics and call out the proponents of the 'boy crisis' for thinking that "[if] girls are successful, boys must certainly be failing" (Bettis and Sternod 36). Additionally, the crisis is regarded by many scholars to really be about "adult anxieties in regard to shifting gender roles, or even [reflecting] shifts in power relations among races and classes" (Wannamaker 8). White men feel that power is being taken away

from them and have therefore entered crisis mode. Other scholars argue that while the rhetoric surrounding the boy crisis is alarmist and a backlash against feminism (Serrato 81), having uncovered problems such as higher suicide rates is an objectively good thing and something that needs to be addressed regardless (Kidd 70).

Coming out of the mythopoetic men's movement, the boy crisis is steeped in essentialist rhetoric. Boys are innately wild and aggressive and have to be allowed to express that to grow up healthy. Gendered behavior is "conflated with biology" once again (Kidd 168-69), especially in the language of parenting manuals published in the 1990s and 2000s. Here, boys are naturally, *biologically*, said to be "active, rambunctious, interested in playing with cars and trucks, and [engaged] in outdoor play" (Riggs 191). And thus, boys should not be punished (or medicated) for their active behavior or taught to be more sensitive.

The real problem, according to the essentialist boy's rhetoric, is feminism. Sommer, for example, argues that feminism has made boys weak and that something needs to be done about it (qtd. in Wannamaker 2-3). Boys are forced to behave in ways that cripple them, i.e. talk about their feelings instead of soldiering on like men are *wired* to do (Golden 195), which has led to the statistics mentioned above.

Others identify not feminism, but patriarchal masculinity as the cause for the boy crisis. Psychologists like Pollack locate the problem among the ranks of boys themselves. It is the 'boy code' that "encourages stoicism, physical and emotional aggressiveness, and false bravado" and disallows emotional expression or good performance at school. It is this code that is to blame for the problems boys face (qtd. in Bettis and Sternod 30). Moreover, Kindlon and Thompson argue that boys are just as sensitive and emotional as girls and that it causes great damage when they are taught to suppress and ignore their emotions (77-78). Instead of empathy, they are taught cruelty, isolation and the devaluation of girls and women (Kindlon and Thompson 221). The work of Niobe Way also echoes these findings. She reports that boys tend to have close and loving friendships with each other when they are young, but by late adolescence at the latest disavow them because they know that vulnerability and intimacy will link them to a certain age (childhood), a sex (female), and a sexuality (gay)" (Way 204-05). So while boys are just as sensitive as girls, they are effectively taught to dismiss and suppress these emotions as not to be perceived as weak.

The fear of being perceived as childish, girlish, or gay is a hallmark of what Jessie Klein calls the 'bully society' (qtd. in Wooden and Gillam 58). Gendered behavior is much more vigorously policed among boys than among adult men. There is a clear hierarchy, one that is centered on a certain ideal body image associated with normative boyhood and manhood, namely that of the athletic jock, which remains out of reach for most boys (Klein qtd. in Wooden and Gillam xxxii, 44; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 15). This hypermasculine fiction of muscled heroes engaged in heroic tasks is very attractive to boys who are aware of their own 'puniness' and feel powerless in their environment (Salisbury and Jackson 141). Already in early adolescence, boys need to aspire to be men, and those who do not fit the masculine ideal are mercilessly policed and called variations of 'sissy', 'crybaby', 'gay', 'mamma's boy' and are negatively compared to girls (Stoudt 20, Riggs 195, Wooden and Gillam 95).

This 'bully society' is also fed by the lack of coming-of-age rituals in our contemporary Western society. In previous centuries it was clearer what one had to do to be perceived as a man: "A man was a male adult—someone whom other male adults had certified in a ritual context, a rite of passage, as qualified to take on responsibilities not only for his own family but also for the larger community or nation" (Nathanson and Young 156). By now, these formalized rituals and rites of passage have disappeared, leaving boys and teenagers without direction. Kindlon and Thompson argue that often what remains is "[joining] other boys in a test of 'courage' or endurance" (190-91). The 'bully society,' which finds its way not just into high schools but also colleges, becomes attractive because it imposes its own rituals on boys, often in the form of hazing, and thus offers a certain rite of passage, promising to turn boys into real men.

What has to be mentioned at this point is that despite the often-cited evidence that boys seem to be suffering everywhere and are still caught up in traditional patriarchal gender structures, there are studies that offer a different picture. As of 2013, Eric Anderson has studied and conducted numerous ethnographic studies on homosexual youth, as well as homophobia among heterosexual youth. He concluded that there is a general decrease in homophobic sentiment and that heterosexual youth exceedingly "distance themselves from the type of conservative forms of muscularity, hyper-heterosexuality, aggression, and stoicism" (80). The seemingly ubiquitous concept of

boyhood does not necessarily reflect the actual lives of all boys, not even those of all white middle-class boys, let alone that of diverse groups. But it is clearly a very powerful myth in the United States, one that informs the work of educators, psychologists, medical professionals and the media alike.

All of these different elements discussed here—traditional boyhood, childhood innocence, children as miniature adults, emotional and sensitive boys—can all be found in the representations of boys and men in *Gravity Falls* and *Steven Universe*.

The eponymous Steven of *Steven Universe* is a sensitive yet active boy, incorporating both traditionally feminine as well as masculine traits. He does not fit the aggressively masculine mold but is not ridiculed for it. The adults in his life want to protect him from danger, echoing the worries for childhood innocence, and even when he joins in on their adventures do they try to teach, guide and protect him.

Dipper Pines of *Gravity Falls*, on the other hand, does very much live in the 'bully society'. One of his two great-uncles wants to toughen him up, the other urges him to master his emotions. He is constantly policed and ridiculed for his gendered behavior by his peers and the adults in his life, who compare him to a girl throughout the show. Despite the fact that Dipper is only 12 years old, the show echoes an attitude that is undoubtedly familiar to us and that relates to the view that children are miniature adults: he better start acting like a man.

As stated above, boyhood is not only tightly linked to childhood but also adult masculinity. The representations of both boys and men in children's media can therefore not be sufficiently analyzed without also taking elements of adult masculinity into account. Before we turn to the practical analysis at the center of this paper, we will therefore study certain aspects of masculinity more closely in order to gain a better understanding of the subject matter at hand.

3. Men and Masculinity

At the time of this writing, masculinity has received a good amount of academic attention. It has not been studied as extensively as femininity, but there is a considerable body of work. A comprehensive account, let alone an in-depth one, would exceed the boundaries of this paper by far. Entire aspects of masculinity and its representation have been omitted, such as the loss of faith in US-American masculinity in the wake

of the Vietnam War, or the concept of the 'New Sensitive Man' (for the latter, please see Kimmel's *Manhood in America*), to name but a few. Only a handful of key issues has been selected for the discussion at hand.

Seeing as the notion of 'boys will be boys,' which has been the focus of the previous section, is closely linked to the notion of traditional or toxic masculinity, I will first delve into its roots and main elements. After that, I will look at a partial aspect of traditional masculinity: the heroic ideal and its celebration of the masculine body. Lastly, I will discuss the connection between reason and masculinity because it will become relevant for the analysis of *Gravity Falls* in particular.

3.1. Toxic Masculinity

The term "toxic masculinity" can reportedly be traced back to Shepherd Bliss, a notable figure of the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s and 1990s (Gilchrist). It denotes a masculinity characterized by misogyny, homophobia, racism and violence, as well as "extreme competition and greed, insensitivity to or lack of consideration of the experiences and feelings of others, a strong need to dominate and control others, an incapacity to nurture, [and] a dread of dependency" (Kupers 717). It has since then become a popular term in the discussion of gender representation in media.

In academic circles, 'toxic masculinity' is often disregarded in favor of 'hegemonic masculinity', a term coined by sociologist R. W. Connell. It was not Connell's intention, however, to describe such a specific configuration of traits (Stephens ix). Borrowing the term 'hegemony' from Antonio Gramsci's analysis of class relations, Connell uses it to describe practices which legitimize the patriarchal structures of society (77). It denotes the masculinity on top of the food chain, as it were, among a multiplicity of masculinities and femininities, and is subject to historical change (Connell 76-77). It is therefore incorrect to use the term hegemonic masculinity as the academic stand-in for toxic masculinity and I have therefore decided to avoid it unless discussing Connell's work directly.

In his discussion of the 'Self-Made Man,' Michael Kimmel traces toxic masculinity back to the aftermath of the Civil War. Here, he argues, it established itself as the dominant masculinity to the detriment of other masculinities imported from Europe

(see Kimmel, *Birth* 137). Despite being almost two centuries old, toxic masculinity, or the 'Self-Made Man,' is still familiar to us.

No matter what social upheavals this model has faced—the industrialization changing the nature of work, the Great Depression making it impossible for many men to provide for their families, the feminist and civil rights movements—men have found ways to revive traditional masculinity again and again, much like traditional boyhood has been perpetuated time and again. The "ideal American man [still] is, or aspires to be, aggressive, strong, individualistic, emotionless, and competitive: a 'self-made' winner" (Wooden and Gillam 70). One need not look further than the current popularity of the superhero genre that teems with such depictions of manhood.

Even so, it is impossible to deny that there have been significant changes in regard to gender relations beyond cultural myths and representations. Connell, for example, emphasizes the discrepancy between 'hegemonic' masculinity and lived reality and argues that while the "number of men rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small," a majority still benefits from a system that privileges (certain) men (Connel 79). Toxic masculinity may not (or no longer) describe the lived reality of many men, but it remains a powerful cultural fiction to this day, generating many a stock character in our media landscape. We also have to take into account the recent 'Me Too' and 'Time's Up' movements fighting against sexual violence perpetrated against women, as well as the 2016 US presidential election that put a prime example of toxic masculinity in the White House (Sexton). Toxic masculinity is clearly still with us.

As mentioned above, toxic masculinity became the dominant model during the 19th century. It is based on autonomy and mobility (both social and geographical), men's activities in a public observable arena, as well as "accumulated wealth and status" as opposed to inheritance (Kimmel, *Birth* 137). This configuration of masculinity is about forging one's own path, proving one's own worth, rather than being handed it. The need to prove oneself extends also to the gendered performance of men: "Manhood must be proved—and proved constantly" (Kimmel, *Birth* 140), a sentiment which is echoed by many masculinity scholars (see, for example, Seidler 151). At the heart of this constant competition, Kimmel identifies fear of other men. It is not so much that men possess an inner drive to dominate others, but rather a fear that others may gain

power over *them* (*Manhood* 6). In his view, domination becomes a preemptive strike, if you will. Men fear that other men may regard them as "less manly, as weak, timid, frightened" (*Manhood* 6) and therefore an easy target. Because men do not want to be subordinated, they dominate others before it can be done to them.

Thus, the gendered behavior of American men does not happen in relation to (or in opposition of) women, as much as it does in relation to other men. Women are not negligible, according to Kimmel, but it is the *idea* of them rather than women themselves that poses a problem (*Manhood* 7). Femininity becomes the boogeyman that endangers a man's odds in his competition with other men. Moreover, emotionality or vulnerability becomes a weakness that men cannot afford, lest it is used against them (Nardi 18). Traditionally feminine traits such as empathy and passivity undermine competition and are therefore seen as weakness.

Men's fear of the feminine increased during the second half of the 19th century. As mentioned in the previous section, women were in charge of raising their sons and turning them into civilized gentlemen. Men feared that a continued female influence would lead to the emasculation of the next generation and did their best to rescue their sons from such a fate. This increasingly equated manhood with the "repudiation of the feminine, a resistance to mothers' and wives' efforts to civilize men" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 60). Civilization was seen as a danger to the energetic and aggressive male spirit, to male competition, to the wild beast living in each man.

Additionally, men emphatically differentiated themselves not only from women but also from homosexual men, the latter of which were associated with a distinct lack of masculinity. By the end of the 19th century, gay men were firmly "associated with effeminacy, cowardice, and lack of aggression" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 100). Women and gay man alike were embodiments of femininity and thus something that needed to be suppressed and dominated.

In the 1920s and 30s, this fear of homosexual men had reached into men's homes, because they feared that effeminacy in boys was a sure sign that they would grow up to be gay men (Kimmel, *Manhood* 203-4). Moreover, tabloids at the time vilified homosexuals as child molesters, giving homosexual masculinity a terrifying overtone (Kimmel, *Manhood* 204). Boys, therefore, had to be doubly protected: from the sexual threat lurking outside their homes as well as the potential homosexual within them.

In order to escape the specter of homosexuality, men in the early 20th century had to *perform* hypermasculine behavior to *appear* masculine. Masculinity was "increasingly seen as an act, a form of public display," and one that never ended (Kimmel, *Manhood* 100). Men were constantly aware of each other and had to make sure they acted, spoke and dressed manly enough so that they would not be regarded as anything other than 'real' men.

Economic upheavals made it harder to prove one's manhood, however. With problems such as "rapid industrialization, technological transformation, capital concentration, urbanization, and immigration" men frequently felt impotent and emasculated by society (Kimmel, *Manhood* 83). Women's suffrage and their subsequent and increased entry into the workforce, as well as large groups of immigrants entering the United States, led men to believe that it was less likely that they would be able to prove their worth in a public arena. Additionally, men's work became more 'feminized,' with white-collar jobs increasingly replacing physically demanding blue-collar work (Kimmel, *Manhood* 90). One strategy to push women out of the workforce was to equate work and masculinity with hardship and 'noble sacrifice': "Work is unpleasant, painful, and cruel—a dirty job that someone has to do" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 97). And that someone was, of course, man. No woman should be forced to endure it; men suffered so that they would be spared.

Decades later the Great Depression once again brought economic hardship. Many men were no longer able to provide for their family. Men no longer controlled their own destiny and became increasingly desperate to prove themselves somehow. There was no longer a clear 'frontier' that allowed men en masse to celebrate and develop their manhood (Mitchell 3). They had to develop other strategies and escape routes to rescue their masculine identities.

On the one hand, whenever traditional masculinity was felt to be in crisis, men attempted to find new arenas in which to prove themselves. The late 19th and early 20th century saw a 'fitness craze' and a proliferation of organized sports and the invention of the gym as a male space (Kimmel, *Manhood* 137). Working out and bodybuilding became popular ways of proving one's manhood (see section 3.2.). Additionally, conflicts and wars overseas became a great boost for toxic masculinity. WWI and WWII made men once again feel like they were "dedicated providers and protec-

tors" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 223). Later on, a popular strategy surfaced with the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s and 90s, talking men to wilderness retreats and engaging them in masculine rituals in order to find the warrior within and redefine their masculinity (Kimmel, *Manhood* 316-319). Even with no wars to fight, men could at least *feel* like true warriors and bring some of that lost confidence back into their lives.

On the other hand, as masculinity became more and more a performance, a set of behaviors rather than an inner quality, it was increasingly lived and enjoyed through fantasy. Men could no longer enact masculinity in the way their fathers and grandfathers were able to, so they "[appropriated] the symbols and props that signified earlier forms of power and excitement" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 118). Thus, masculinity became a *commodity*. Movies and literature that "bolstered the masculine ego through fantasies of conquest and triumph against overwhelming odds" proliferated during the 20th century, and still do to this day (Kimmel, *Manhood* 307). We enjoy the masculine spectacle of many a stock character, such as the cowboys, gangsters, noir detectives, soldiers and veterans, action heroes, and most recently superheroes and supernatural beings such as werewolves and vampires (Kimmel, *Manhood* 325; Mitchell 6). The notion of toxic masculinity may have shifted to accommodate new spaces or to meet new (social) threats, but its core principles have lost little of its potency.

What has hopefully become clear in this brief depiction of toxic masculinity is that its crises and revivals come and go in an almost cyclical fashion. Men are in crisis and find new cultural scripts and heroes to cling to, find new arenas to prove themselves, find new arguments. The recent 'boy crisis' is a testament to the fact that no matter the social changes, toxic masculinity still has a powerful grip on our society. "Men today," so Kimmel argues, "feel as besieged as ever" (*Manhood* 332).

In the next section, I will take a closer look at the male body as a site of masculine competition and will then discuss the notion of heroic masculinity that has been linked to the body in especially the action and adventure genres.

3.2. Hard-Bodied Heroes

At the heart of the adventure narratives aimed at boys and men, one will often find heroic masculinities at play. It will therefore be useful for the analysis of *Gravity Falls*

and *Steven Universe* to discuss heroic masculinity and some of its intricacies in more detail.

When we look at the representations of US-American heroes, we do not find a coherent one-size-fits-all template. A buff Chris Evans evokes a different heroic image than a swashbuckling Harrison Ford or a gun-slinging John Wayne. However, there are certain elements that transcend generic or historical transformations. The classical hero narrative, for example, has seeped into the very bedrock of popular storytelling, especially the 'hero's quest' and the 'contest between good and evil' (Bilz 10). Additionally, the ideal of the hard, well-defined body has become a fundamental aspect of heroic masculinity.

For the classical hero, though, strength of character was more important, favoring values such as "leadership, intelligence, courage, kindness, and perseverance" (Bilz 1) over purely physical strength. Morality—doing what is right and just—occupied center stage more than the body. In her discussion on heroes in young adult literature, Bilz identifies a classical template for the hero and his journey:

> Some qualities of the archetypal hero are that (1) there are extraordinary elements linked to his birth and/or childhood, (2) he has an enemy or enemies, (3) he is helped by allies, (4) he faces obstacles to prove his worth, (5) he has either physical or spiritual conflicts, (6) he has certain taboos or warnings for the things to be avoided, (7) he faces death either literally or figuratively, and (8) he has a reward or knowledge to be gained from his hardship and trials. The archetypal journey consists of departure from the hero's known world, an initiation into maturity or adulthood through facing and overcoming his obstacles and conflicts, and a return to safety with the reward or knowledge gained on the journey. (Bilz 1)

Not all of these traits or stops on the journey find their way into every contemporary narrative. Especially the first element—being born or raised under special circumstances—is often disregarded in favor of the seemingly everyday man, unless one counts being born in the United States as an extraordinary circumstance. Often, heroes are simply soldiers, police officers or adventurers of some kind. In children's narratives, it can go either way. *Gravity Fall*'s Dipper Pines is just a normal boy who stumbles across supernatural phenomena. The eponymous Steven of *Steven Universe*, on the other hand, is half human, half alien. His adventures are based on the fact that he has magical powers.

As mentioned above, the heroic narrative has not remained static. Like all cultural tropes, it too has been transformed, especially in recent years: "Action women and

girls, the comic buddy partnerships, the parodic, camp avenger, and the more-brains-than-brawn masculine protagonist are the visible characterizations which signal and form part of the generic shift" (Mallan 152). Today, many heroes are women or form teams and partnerships of various sizes. But, as Mallan argues further, this has not replaced the classical ideal (152). However, the archetype *has* been hijacked by a specific aspect of masculinity, namely that of the hard body.

The body has become so central, surpassing values such as strength of character, morality and justice, that "cultivating strength [becomes] a supreme virtue in itself" (Salisbury and Jackson 250). This tradition goes as far back as the 19th century. As mentioned previously, men at the end of the 19th century felt that society was getting more and more feminized and were therefore pushing back. The health craze at the time saw many men flock to the gym, hoping to recover their manhood by working out (Kimmel, *Manhood* 126, 310). This did not immediately lead to the spectacle of glistening, well-defined torsos that action blockbusters of the 1980s were so fond of. Although men in genres like the Western were still tough and muscled, they usually did not take off or lose their clothes, and their bodies themselves were not yet weapons. That came later. It was actors since the 80s who had to be "buff and chiseled," and their characters virtual "men of steel" (Gibson 105). Before, the "body did not *contain* the man, expressing the man within; now, that body [*is*] the man" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 127). The body, then, becomes an instrument, a weapon, in and of itself. It must be put on display in all its defined glory in order to "restore faith in American masculinity," (Abele 23) and counteract the feminization of society mentioned above.

Although bodybuilding as we know it today can also be traced back to the 19th century, the image of the muscled body that is celebrated in bodybuilding only entered Hollywood alongside bodybuilders-turned-actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger. The body of bodybuilding is reminiscent of statues and Greek gods, and just like statues, offers hard impenetrable surfaces and boundaries. In contrast, the soft female body is related to fluidity and viscosity (Grosz 194). In order to differentiate itself from femininity, the male body needs to become hard and impenetrable—something that Mallan calls the "phallic fantasy" (151). Most importantly, the bodybuilder's body does not "look like it runs the risk of being merged into other bodies" and "can resist being submerged into the horror of femininity" (Dyer 265). The specter of penetration hangs

above toxic masculinity; any notion of fluidity or physical receptivity needs to be avoided at all costs.

What becomes important for the contemporary hero is “physical size, strength, charisma, pronounced facial features, aggressive behavior, and the ability to generate action” (Gallagher 162), as well as the “male body’s ability to withstand pain” (Gallagher 187). Much of the conflict in heroic narratives is carried out across the body (Tasker 125-128), which routinely has to withstand feats that are physically impossible and survive ordeals that no human body ever could. The hero takes on these tasks, painful as they may be, so that others do not have to: “Contemporary heroes fight wars that the power structure cannot or will not fight, they take on the public responsibilities for combating evil. Consequently, when they suffer, they suffer for all men” (Gibson 115). Masculinity then becomes intrinsically linked with heroic sacrifice. The hero’s suffering in children’s media is usually not as gruesome as it is in action and adventure narratives for adults, and neither is the masculinity of boys as traditionally aggressive. The suffering is often of a more emotional or spiritual nature. However, of the two cartoons to be analyzed, it is *Gravity Falls* especially which shows conventionally physical conflicts that include fist fights (“Fight Fighter”) or bodies being physically put through the wringer when they are possessed by interdimensional demons (“Sock Opera”). Adults on the show also adhere more closely to the heroic ideal or display a spectacle of the hypermasculine body than the young protagonist.

Before we turn to the analysis of *Gravity Falls*, however, there is one more aspect that deserves close consideration, and that is the connection between reason and masculinity.

3.3. Rational Masculinity

Traditional masculinity is not only associated with hard heroic bodies, but also with sharp minds. The connection between men and reason goes back to a philosophical tradition inherited from Europe, namely the mind/body dualism of René Descartes, as well as Immanuel Kant’s moral and political theory. In this tradition several dichotomies have become central, pitting reason against emotion, men against women, the mind against the body, and civilization against nature. Thus, reason—and subse-

quently science and technology—is "culturally defined as a masculine realm" (Connell 164). Furthermore, it is not only masculinity but humanity itself that becomes inextricably linked to reason—for men, that is. Women and children are historically defined as "lacking reason and being closer to nature" and are therefore seen as lesser even in their humanity (Seidler 14).

In the Kantian tradition, only the objective faculty of reason—as opposed to subjective desires, needs and emotions—can serve as a source for moral decision making (Seidler 15). Emotions cannot guide us and offer no insight into what is right. They only steer us wrong. Thus, for a masculine identity fundamentally tied to reason, emotions become a serious threat (Nardi 23).

If emotions lead us astray, it is only logical that they must be controlled. Men have come to understand that they have to master or suppress their emotions if they want to lead a moral life based on rational decisions. The flipside of this is an instinctual distrust of women because they are conceptually linked to emotion (Seidler 37). Women are swayed easily by emotions and their bodily nature, according to this tradition, and can only serve as a distraction from rational and moral life. Their place is not in the public sphere where rational decisions are made.

Reason, scientific exploration, technological progress – one would think that these values suggest an appreciation of intelligence and knowledge. And yet, they are at the very best contested aspects of the men's contemporary gendered behavior.

Intelligence seems to be accepted the most when it serves as a tool for heroic action. Tony Stark's genius in Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* is valued because it lets him fight terrorists. Guy Ritchie's Americanized version of *Sherlock Holmes* turns its eponymous protagonist into an action hero rather than an ascetic detective. Nerds and scientists are enjoyable in an ensemble cast helping and advising the heroic leads, or when they can be mocked for falling short of traditional masculinity in televised fare such as *The Big Bang Theory* (McIntosh, "Geek Masculinity"). In addition, the 'bully society' (Klein qtd. in Wooden and Gillam xxxii) appreciates athleticism above all else and punishes smart boys for their insufficient display of masculinity.

It is paradoxical, then, that men or boys can exhibit a very fundamental aspect of masculinity and at the same time be ridiculed and punished for it. *Gravity Falls* is a great example of this contradictory view of masculinity. On the one hand, the show's

protagonists Dipper and Mabel Pines are cast in a very traditional configuration with Dipper embodying reason, the scientific spirit and knowledge, and his sister emotion, irrationality and purity. Moreover, Dipper's intelligence and scientifically inclined mind are often the key to saving the day. On the other hand, however. Dipper's peer group, his male relatives, as well as random strangers, continuously mock his lack of traditionally masculine behaviors and features.

Both, reason as an inherently masculine trait, as well as the bullying of smart boys, will be discussed further in the next section, which offers a close reading of *Gravity Falls*. Other aspects of especially toxic masculinity, such as heroic masculinity, competition, and the mastery of emotions will also be discussed.

4. *Gravity Falls*

Gravity Falls is an animated series created by Alex Hirsch for Disney Channel and Disney XD. It comprises two seasons with a total of 40[1] episodes that were aired between 2012 and 2016. The cartoon follows 12-year-old Dipper Pines and his twin sister Mabel as they are forced by their parents to spend their summer with their great uncle Stanley "Grunkle Stan" Pines in the fictional town of Gravity Falls, Roadkill County, Oregon. Stan runs a tourist trap called the Mystery Shack, which is located in the woods outside the town proper. During their stay, Dipper finds a mysterious scientific journal detailing a variety of supernatural creatures that he and his sister run into on a regular basis. The main plot revolves around Dipper's investigation of these mysterious phenomena, his search for the journal's author, as well as their struggle to protect the town from supernatural dangers.

The Pines family is joined by Jesus Altamirano "Soos" Ramirez, the Shack's simple-minded yet lovable handy-man, and 15-year-old Wendy Corduroy, a tomboyish part-time employee at the Shack, as well as Dipper's crush. Toward the middle of season two, the show adds another main character to the roaster, Stanford "Grunkle Ford" Pines, the secret twin brother of Stanley who had hitherto been trapped in another dimension. Additionally, there are two main antagonists Dipper and the others must go up against, the infantile Gideon Gleeful and a triangle-shaped demon, Bill Cipher, of season one and two respectively.

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[1] Some services, like Netflix, split the last episode into two episodes, raising the total number of episodes to 41.

Running through the show like a red thread is the exploration and navigation of gender, and masculinity in particular. As is typical for adventure/mystery shows, there are many physical and mental challenges that Dipper needs to overcome in order to protect his loved ones and the town he lives in. An additional source of conflict is the notion of growing up, proving oneself, leaving childhood behind and becoming a man. Both themes, the genre-typical heroics, as well as coming of age, are useful contexts for constructing appropriate masculine behavior, but also for deconstructing and questioning said behavior, mainly through parody. Throughout the series, Dipper is caught between exhibiting peer-approved, i.e. traditionally masculine behavior and staying true to the gentler, more caring type of masculinity he has adopted around and in conjunction with his sister Mabel.

Much of the show's comedy derives from the exaggeration or transgression of gendered norms and expectations. For example, one episode revolves around a group of Manotaurs — a gendered wordplay on the Minotaurs of ancient Greek mythology — who live in the so-called Man Cave in the woods and attempt to teach Dipper how to be a man ("Manliness"[2]). Another exaggeration can be found in the form of Wendy's father "Manly Dan," who teaches his sons to fish with their bare hands because it is more manly, and then proceeds to physically assault the fish with body slams and punches ("Gobblewonker"). When it comes to gender transgressions, the show is peppered with effeminate characters, such as Deputy Durland, who becomes emotionally distraught that all the pink balloons were gone before he could get one himself ("Irrational"), and the villain Gideon Gleeful, who enjoys giving makeovers and wears hairnets over his white wig-like hair ("The Hand", "Stanchurian").

Those exaggerations and transgressions of gender norms and stereotypes result in characters that are, more often than not, caricatures rather than complex, three-dimensional people. While the main set of characters has their three-dimensional moments, it is only Dipper, Wendy, and later Ford, who are rarely reduced to caricatured behavior. Dipper, as the main character, is the focal point of the show and needs to be taken seriously by the audience. It is therefore understandable why he especially needs to be viewed as a person with realistic struggles and character traits, as well as emotional depth. As for the others, both Ford and Wendy are im-

[2] Episode titles are shortened in this section due to their length.

portant to Dipper, the former of which is his hero and role model, the latter his crush. As a result, they are treated as seriously by the narration as Dipper himself. Other characters—even Mabel—are often presented as parodied versions of real people. Parody as a tool of subversion will be discussed further n section 4.9.

The following analysis will almost exclusively look at the boys and men of *Gravity Falls*. Only section 4.1, which contrasts Dipper and Mabel, will deal with female characters in more detail because the twins are cast in the traditional gendered binary of reason vs. emotion. Section 4.2. will dive into toxic masculinity and discuss in detail how Dipper's gendered behavior is routinely policed by the 'bully society,' before dealing with one aspect of toxic masculinity in the subsequent section, namely competition. Section 4.3. looks at absent parents and authority figures more generally, taking note of the incompetent adults that are a staple of children's media content, as well as male role models. The following two sections deal with heroic masculinity and emotional growth, respectively. The final two sections investigate diverse masculinities, such as men of color and homosexual men, and the devious masculinities portrayed by the villains of the show.

4.1. Dipper and Mabel Pines

While there are many male characters in *Gravity Falls* that lend themselves for a comparison with Dipper, the character he is most often contrasted with is his twin sister. For that reason, I would like to take a brief look at both Dipper and Mabel, the latter of which often happens to be the polar opposite of the former where gendered behavior is concerned.

The gendered difference between these two characters already starts with their appearance. Dipper has shaggy brown hair and always wears the same outfit (which is a longstanding tradition in animation): a white and blue baseball cap bearing a phallic pine tree logo, red shirt, blue vest, gray shorts, white socks, and black shoes. His outfit seems to be more practical than anything else, something that covers his body and keeps him relatively cool in the hot temperatures of summer. The only item he is shown to care about is his baseball cap.

In contrast, Mabel wears different sweaters, skirts, and hairbands throughout the show, which emphasizes the stereotype that girls care more about their appearance

than boys and put an effort into looking pretty. Her outfits range from bright pinks to pastel teals and yellows and involve cute designs and lots of glitter and bling. There is no logical reason other than feminine appeal as to why Mabel is wearing sweaters in summer when many of the other characters prefer short sleeves.

Their personalities, too, could not be more different. Dipper is a stereotypical nerd, rational and clever, who stays up all night reading mystery and crime novels, pours over his journal (a bestiary he found hidden in the woods) and loves to play the show's version of Dungeons and Dragons. He also has a practical side in him and sometimes builds and repairs gadgets when he needs to. He is worried and often scared, which he has to overcome time and again in order to protect his family or the town.

Dipper is always skeptical and falls back on logical arguments to counteract the craziness he encounters in the town of Gravity Falls. When Grunkle Stan shows them a bottomless pit, he cannot help but point out that such a thing is "by definition" impossible ("Stanchurian").

Mabel is none of these things. She is very energetic, rarely scared or hesitant, and cares mostly about boys, cute or silly things and dance parties. She does not like to play games with complicated rules, like chess, because she does not understand them, or even care to, whereas Dipper always excels at them ("Little Dipper").

The twins are very explicitly cast as opposites: one is rational, the other irrational, one embodies the mind, the other the heart. Dipper defines himself as the smart guy ("Blind Eye") and his goal is to uncover the mysteries of the town and find the mysterious author of the journal, whereas Mabel thinks of herself as a good person and pure of heart ("Mabelcorn"). Her goal is to experience a summer romance ("Tourist Trapped"), which is reiterated time and again. Mabel does not only dream of romance, but she is furthermore cast in an almost motherly role and shown to develop maternal feelings for her pet pig Waddles ("Pig"). Thus, Mabel is routinely portrayed with traditionally feminine values in mind.

Their problem-solving strategies could also not be more different. Dipper overcomes hurdles because of his ingenuity, his planning. Mabel, on the other hand, wins through sheer irrationality, for example when she uses confetti canons and karaoke machines to defeat a horde of zombies ("Scary-Oke"). There is no episode that illus-

trates this more clearly than "Irrational Treasure" in which the twins follow a treasure map that was made by a crazy old man. There is nothing logical about the map, so Dipper cannot solve the puzzle. Mabel's own brand of illogical behavior, on the other hand, turns out to be the key.

As has been discussed in the previous section, reason and rationality are deeply linked to masculinity in our society and cast in firm opposition to femininity, emotion, irrationality (Seidler 37). *Gravity Falls* clearly reiterates that tradition. At their core, Mabel and Dipper have very traditionally masculine and feminine qualities, if very exaggerated and parodied when it comes to Mabel. Part of the reason stems from the fact that in animation, especially animation aimed at children, single and often stereotypical character traits are routinely exaggerated, partly for comedic purposes, and partly to make it supposedly easier for children to unpack what is happening on-screen (Seiter 300). Other shows such as *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time* which show complex male, female and genderqueer characters would suggest that children are very much capable of unpacking subtler messages as these, however.

Additionally, Mabel's femininity is contrasted with Wendy's for example, who is a very laid-back tomboy and rarely shows traditionally feminine behavior or personality traits. The show is therefore not quite as polarizing as it first appears, and rather contrasts different stereotypes with each other instead of delivering complex characters. Much of the show's humor stems from such stereotyping.

Even though Dipper and Mabel are such polar opposites, they often combine forces to save the day. Women are thus not left out of the narrative completely. However, femininity in *men* is tolerated less on *Gravity Falls*. As previously discussed, it is femininity more than actual women, that poses a threat to men (Kimmel, *Manhood* 7). The next section will analyze elements of toxic masculinity such as this in more detail.

4.2. Toxic Masculinity

Gravity Falls has a contradictory approach to portraying toxic masculinity. On the one hand, it is a continued source of humor, framing it not as a desirable option but as something that deserves to be ridiculed. Characters like Mr. Pool-Check ("Deep End") who do push-ups on their index fingers, have protruding veins on their bulky

necks and comport themselves like drill sergeant are a familiar sight. Additionally, the misogynistic behavior of characters like Stan is sometimes turned on its head for comedic purposes. For example, when he is too lazy to get up and find the remote for the TV, he ends up watching a period piece on the "Black and White Period Piece Old Lady Movie Channel" and ends up highly engaged to the point of tears ("Inconveniencing"). However, even though the show keeps ridiculing toxic masculinity, there are many instances in which such behavior is taken seriously and even treated as desirable.

Less humorous scenes revolve around the family dynamic of the twins and their Grunkle Stan, the latter of which is unable to show tender emotions. This is both indulged and encouraged by his family. When Dipper hugs him in "Dreamscaperers" Stan asks him skeptically if this is a hug to which he replies "Nope! It's a chokehold," and jokingly starts choking him ([00:21:38-00:21:42]). Additionally, when there is a situation in which Stan *does* show emotions, no matter how unwillingly, it is Dipper who judges him for it:

> DIPPER: Are you *crying*?
> STAN: I have campaign confetti in my eye.
> (emphasis added by the original voice acting, "Stanchurian" [00:21:24-00:21:28])

Both the incredulity on Dipper's part and Stan's denial reinforce the belief that men are not allowed to be vulnerable. This notion is even more explicitly stated when Stan's twin brother Ford joins the show.

During Ford's brief mentorship of Dipper, he teaches the boy that emotions, especially fear, are a weakness. When they explore an abandoned spaceship and accidentally activate sentinel drones that scan for biological responses to fear, like a surge in adrenaline, Dipper's anxiety and fear get them both into trouble. Subsequently, with Ford's life on the line and his teachings fresh in his mind, Dipper learns to master his emotions and save his mentor ("vs. the Future"). Controlling one's emotions is key for an adventurer like Ford, even if it seems contrary to Dipper's personality, who is, more often than not, scared of the supernatural creatures he encounters. On top of that, Ford wants to teach Dipper that emotional connections and even a real life are in opposition to the calling of an adventurer. Dipper would have to abandon his loved ones, mainly Mabel, and drop out of school if he took Ford up on his offer to join him and properly become his apprentice. Ford himself does not mind leaving his own

brother behind and expects nothing less of Dipper. Additionally, he does not form a connection to other characters, especially no female one. He does not spend an extensive amount of his time with Mabel and does not seem to care much about the overly emotional girl. Clearly, emotions and women have no space in Ford's world. What is more, being such an accomplished and scientifically-inclined adventurer, not to mention the author of the journals that have guided Dipper's own adventures, Ford is framed as the ideal mentor for Dipper and someone that the boy, together with the audience, can look up to. Thus, the audience is put in a position where they are positively inclined to Ford's teachings.

Misogyny is a very integral aspect of toxic masculinity. Whether it is portrayed as outright hostility, or simply the erasure of women from a narrative. In the constant competition between men to appear more manly and more successful than others, vulnerability becomes a weakness they cannot afford. Therefore, they do their best to suppress or distance themselves from femininity (Nardi 18). Women become something of a currency in men's life and are otherwise disregarded (Kimmel, *Manhood* 7). In this regard, the message of *Gravity Falls* is conflicting as well. Stan's particular brand of misogyny, for example, does not seem to be accepted. He is a sleazy crook and his treatment of women is explicitly regarded as wrong in "Roadside Attraction" where he teaches Dipper how to pick up girls without taking their feelings into account. Even so, however, Stan's disastrous encounters with women tend to be resolved in his favor. For a brief time, he is dating Lazy Sue, the waitress at the local diner. It does not take long, however, for him to regret it thoroughly. During the end credits of the episode in which they get together ("Manliness"), we see how Stan is put off by the constant phone calls and voice messages. Lazy Susan is framed as unbearably clingy, turning his dismissal of her (and other women) into an understandable behavior that the viewer can empathize with. Additionally, in "Dreamscaperers" when the gang travels into Stan's mind, they witness his first date with Lazy Susan:

> STAN: So, your, uh...your eye is weird, let's...let's talk about that.
> LAZY SUSAN: (*She laughs.*)
> STAN: (*He laughs and internally thinks*:) This is going terrible. I can't think of anything to say and she…looks weird up close. Think of a way out! (*Aloud he shouts*:) Non-specific excuse! (*He knocks over the food and runs away from the table*.)

> ("Dreamscaperers" [00:11:32-00:11:43])

Awkwardness might indeed be the main motivation for Stan's need to exit the situation, especially since he already knows what Lazy Susan looks like up close. The way it is framed, however, clearly reduces her to her appearance. He does not like her sagging left eyelid, which is one of the reasons for his hasty exit. Even when Stan is explicitly called out on his misogynistic behavior, the message gets somewhat lost in the subsequent action plot. On a road trip, Stan hits on an attractive woman who turns out to be a Black Widow with the intention of devouring him. The show allows her a moment in which she laments the entitlement of men:

> DARLENE/BLACK WIDOW: Tell me, Stan. Before I transformed [into a spider], who'd you think was in charge? You, with your cheesy lines and 'fake confidence?' *I'm* the master pickup artist here. Sorry, toots! This time, *you're* getting used for *your* body! Which, to my weird species, is food.
> (emphasis added by the original voice acting, "Roadside" [00:15:15-00:16:03])

Stan liked Darlene for her body and expected to be liked in return, regardless of his own appearance or age. He expected his pick-up lines to work on a younger, more attractive woman. However, she is a supernatural creature praying on humans and ultimately needs to be stopped. Not only that, she even calls herself part of a "weird species," which undermines her righteous anger. All in all, her words do not quite have the desired impact.

But it is not only literal man-eaters that cause anxiety in men and therefore need to be avoided. *Gravity Falls* makes it clear that many aspects coded as feminine should be avoided. Men, especially Dipper, are punished for being weak or vulnerable. When Robbie and Dipper decide to carry out their rivalry like men, i.e. with their fists, Dipper gets cold feet and brings a video game fighter to life to fight in his stead. Mabel does not approve of fighting, but Stan makes it impossible for Dipper to actually listen to Mabel. He tells the boy if he listens to her they might as well share dresses too and that he should "either go face [Robbie] like a man or [hide] indoors like a wimp" ("Fight Fighter" [00:05:20-00:05:24]). Predictably, Dipper chooses to fight. However, he soon realizes his mistake when the video game fighter goes after Robbie with abandon. Dipper decides to fight Rumble himself and does not only get beaten up but also ridiculed when the fighter tells Dipper he "[fights] like a girl who is also a baby" ([00:17:48-00:17:50]). Dipper is continuously put down for not being manly enough. It is therefore no wonder that he shies away from overtly female be-

haviors and interests. Sleepovers, for example, are his worst nightmare and he chooses to sleep outside under the stars with a wolf gnawing on his leg rather than be exposed to Mabel and her friends (“Carpet Diem”).

Not possessing obvious markers of masculinity continues to be a source of anxiety for Dipper. In “Dipper vs. Manliness” his immaculate hairless chest literally blinds Mabel and Stan, upon which he makes it his mission to become more manly. When he finally learns that being a man has more to do with doing what is right rather than having a well-toned body, he comically grows a single chest hair. Moreover, Dipper’s high-pitched voice is not only commented upon throughout the show, it also receives special attention in “The Bottomless Pit” where Dipper drinks a potion in a flashback scene that deepens his voice drastically (and subsequently makes everyone resent or fear him because of it). The lesson here is clear, do not give in to the superficial expectations of masculinity and learn to accept yourself for who you are. And yet, this lesson is undermined by the continued ridicule Dipper is exposed to when he does not live up to these perceived standards.

Whereas Dipper is judged for being scared or weak or having too high a voice, something he did not choose and cannot help, other characters get called out for venturing into traditionally female areas on purpose. As part of his emo punk-rock get-up, Robbie likes to wear a bit of makeup, but when Dipper asks with judgmental incredulity if he is wearing mascara, Robbie replies defensively that “it’s eyepaint for *men*” (emphasis added by the original voice acting, “Fight Fighter” [00:01:22-00:01:24]). Even though makeup is an accepted feature of both entertainment groups such as punk bands as well as emo subculture, Robbie feels the need to defend himself for his choices, especially in front of his perceived romantic rival.

Similarly, Gideon’s interest in makeup and style does not escape judgment, although he is not awarded an opportunity to explain himself. When Gideon asks Mabel out on a date, she confesses to Dipper that she likes him like a friend, like “a little sister” (“The Hand” [00:12:10-00:12:11]), but that he is not a potential boyfriend. Wearing makeup and enjoying makeovers disqualifies him as a desirable male partner. When the twins round up allies to defeat Gideon at the end of season one, they promise the gnomes a “new queen, one even more beautiful than [Mabel]”, i.e. Gideon, in exchange for their help (“Gideon Rises” [00:09:00-00:09:04]). When characters teeter

on the edge of what is acceptable, like Dipper, the 'bully society' polices and punishes their behavior. Male characters, like Gideon, who do not conform to traditionally masculine standards, seem to be expelled from this exclusive club of men who live up to the ideal.

Whereas many of these instances are parodied accounts of situations one can find en masse in real life, taken together they create a clear message. It is not okay for boys and men to behave in traditionally feminine ways. Even mere hints of femininity, of weakness, are enough to shake the very foundation of masculinity.

It is the rivalry among men, the need to dominate others before one is being dominated oneself, that drives this fear of femininity (Kimmel, *Manhood* 6-7). The following section will look at rivalry and competition in *Gravity Falls* in more detail.

4.3. Rivalry and Competition

One aspect of toxic masculinity is an unhealthy and relentless competition amongst men. The need to prove themselves to other men never lets up (Kimmel, *Manhood* 265). It is also competition that is to blame for men finding it difficult to form close relationships with other men (Nardi 18-22). One cannot show vulnerability or emotion in relationships with other men, because they might use that to their own advantage.

Gravity Falls is reminiscent of Nardi's observations and does not let Dipper have a close relationship with his peers. Finding a peer group is more difficult for Dipper than it is for his sister. Whereas Mabel eventually teams up with two girls her own age ("Double Dipper"), there do not seem to be any 12-year-old boys in Gravity Falls that Dipper can or even wants to befriend. He is content investigating the mysteries of the journal and horsing around with Soos (like blowing up hotdogs in the microwave in "The Hand")—up until he falls in love with Wendy. Suddenly he wants nothing more than to be a part of her circle of friends in order to spend more time with her. He even goes so far as to lie about his age and tells her that he is 13 years old, "technically a teenager," when she hesitates to introduce him to them ("Inconveniencing" [00:03:27-00:03:28]). Although Dipper is finally allowed to spend time with their group, his continued engagement with the older teenagers is fraught with tension.

Dipper is routinely called out for being too scared, too worried or hesitant, all of which are not acceptable masculine character traits. Especially not among a group of teen-

agers who are constantly engaged in competition and care about the respect and acceptance of their peers. If Dipper wants to be a part of Wendy's group of friends, he has to censor and change his behavior. The policing of gendered behavior is what Jessie Klein (qtd. in Wooden and Gillam 58) calls a staple of the 'bully society' that Dipper clearly lives in. Being part of an older group also gives him an opportunity to prove himself as a man (Kindlon and Thompson 190-91), thus functioning as somewhat of a rite of passage. However, the 'bully society' extends far beyond his peer group. Adults are just as guilty of calling him out or putting him down.

Throughout the show, both major and minor characters routinely remark upon Dipper's gendered body and behavior. He is addressed as "little girl" by Manly Dan ("Headhunters" [00:10:39-00:10:40]), called out for his girlish voice ("Inconveniencing"), and as stated previously said to "fight like a girl who is also a baby" ("Fight Fighter" [00:17:48-00:17:50]). Dipper is 12 years old, and therefore needs to act like man—not a girl, or a child, but a man. Gendered and age-appropriate behavior collapse into each other.

The girls of Dipper's age do not have to comply with such a rigorous form of self-censure; they are allowed to act like children if they so please and may also engage in traditionally masculine behavior (e.g. Wendy scales a tree with her belt in "Bunker") or possess symbols of masculinity (Mabel owns a grappling hook that she enjoys using on unsuspecting objects in "Tourist Trapped"). The masculine behavior of girls does not escape commentary but is never ridiculed to the same extent as the feminine behavior of boys and is ultimately permitted without negative consequences.

Furthermore, Dipper is often compared to his sister, who, unlike Dipper, rarely shows fear or hesitation. When Dipper is afraid of climbing over a tall chain-link fence, his romantic rival Robbie points out that *Mabel* was able to climb over the fence, implying that it should not be a problem for him if a girl was able to do it as well ("Inconveniencing").

Such commentary is not intended as good-natured ribbing. It tries to and succeeds in policing gendered behavior. Dipper continuously changes his behavior and pretends to be something he is not: unafraid and stoic. In "Summerween," for example, he plans to go trick-or-treating with his sister and her friends but learns quickly that if he wants to be a part of Wendy's group, such acts are a thing of the past.

ROBBIE: Hey, what's with the candy? You going trick-or-treating or something?
DIPPER: Well, actually, I…uh…
WENDY: Shut up, Robbie, of course he's not going trick-or-treating.
("Summerween" [00:03:28-00:03:35])

Here, being a boy and having to be mature are conflated once again. Trick-or-treating is for children, losers, or girls, but not for 12-year-old boys, especially not if they want to impress their crush and be regarded as desirable. However, Dipper is not the only one whose behavior is called into question. Far from a stable category, masculinity needs to be reasserted at the slightest provocation. Not only that, it has to *constantly* be reaffirmed (Kimmel, *Manhood* 140). Dipper himself calls others into question when it suits his goals.

Masculinity and fear are treated as mutually exclusive, either one is a man, or one is afraid. Just the accusation of being a coward is bad enough that one must prove oneself, no matter how transparent the accusation or manipulation may be. One cannot get out of a dare by arguing or being above it. The most prominent example of this takes place when a group of Manotaurs deems it impossible to teach Dipper to be manly. Subsequently, he calls them out for being too scared:

DIPPER: Obviously you guys think it would be too hard to train me. Maybe you're not *man* enough to try. […] Seems to me you're *scared* to teach me how to be a man. Hey, do you guys hear that? It sounds like…(*He starts clucking*)…oh, that's weird…(*He clucks some more*.)…is that…that sounds like…(*He clucks some more*.)…yeah, a bunch of chickens!
(emphasis added by the original voice acting, "Manliness" [00:10:56-00:11:29])

This very apparent attempt is enough to make the Manotaurs reconsider their earlier verdict. They emphatically do not want to be accused of being 'not man enough,' so they agree to teach him the art of manliness after all.

It is not only exaggerated or parodied versions of masculine behavior that are so easily called into question. Dipper himself is often manipulated into exhibiting bravery or masculine behavior after being declared too scared or childish. When Dipper, Mabel, and Wendy's group of friends attempt to break into an abandoned convenience store, Robbie tries but ultimately fails to pry open the door.

ROBBIE: I think it's…it's stuck.
DIPPER: Let me take a crack at it.
ROBBIE: Oh, yeah. I can't get in, but I'm sure Junior here is gonna break it down like Hercules.
WENDY: Come on, leave him alone. He's just a little kid."
("Inconveniencing" [00:06:59-00:07:10])

Being called a little kid is just as bad as being compared to a girl, especially when it is Dipper's crush Wendy who says it. He cannot let that stand but needs to prove himself. In order to do so, he climbs onto the roof of the convenience store, breaks the panel of the air vent and climbs into the building that way. From the inside, it is easy to unlock the front door and let the others inside. Suddenly, Wendy's group of friends think he is cool and that it was a great idea that they brought him along. Except for Robbie, who has been shown up for the second time at that point.

Even though Dipper and other characters continuously prove themselves, the respect or regard of other men is easily lost. A toe out of line is enough to suddenly be viewed as unmanly or uncool and lose one's status in the group. When Dipper is first introduced to Wendy's friends, he inadvertently causes Robbie to lose face in front of the group.

> ROBBIE: […] I'm the guy who spray-painted the water tower.
> DIPPER: Oh, you mean the big muffin.
> ROBBIE: Um, it's a giant explosion.
> LEE: Ha ha, kinda *does* look like a muffin.
> (*Lee and Nate laugh while Robbie glares at Dipper.*)
> ("Inconveniencing" [00:04:35-00:04:49])

Robbie's friends laugh at Dipper's innocent remark and thus Robbie and Dipper's rivalry is born. A single insignificant slip-up can negate months of hard-earned respect and Robbie will not forget that it was Dipper who had a hand in it.

This, again, is different for the female members of the group. Wendy and Tambry simply have to be there to be accepted. Most of the boys, however, are engaged in a constant one-upmanship. Thompson, for example, is only part of the group because he allows them to bully him. If he showed that he does not like being bullied, the acceptance of the group would vanish.

Dipper, too, loses the respect of the others almost as soon as he gains it and therefore has to prove himself all over again. After breaking into the abandoned convenience store, Dipper realizes that the place is haunted. When the older teenagers dare each other to lie down in the chalk outlines of two bodies they find behind the counter, Dipper thinks that it is a bad idea given his knowledge of the supernatural (which the others have no idea about).

> DIPPER: Maybe let's not do that.
> LEE: This guy's *scared*!

> DIPPER: All I'm saying is, why tempt the fates? I mean, what if this place really is haunted?
> […]
> ROBBIE: Just take it down a notch, Captain Buzzkill.
> DIPPER: But I thought I was Dr. Fun Times!
> ROBBIE: Well, you're acting like Captain Buzzkill, right?
> […]
> TAMBRY (*typing on phone*): Status update: Trapped in store with insane nine-year-old.
> DIPPER: I'm not a nine-year-old! I'm 13, technically a teen!
> ("Inconveniencing" [00:12:34-00:13:09])

In this scene Dipper is accused of being scared, a bore, and a child, and to prove them wrong, he lies down in the chalk outlines himself, thereby triggering the appearance of the ghosts that haunt the store. The pressure to prove himself outweighed his very rational concerns.

Robbie and Dipper's rivalry does not only revolve around one-upping each other in order to gain the ephemeral respect of the group. They are also competing for Wendy's affection. When Wendy agrees to date Robbie, he promptly sends a triumphant look toward Dipper ("Pig"). The need to outdo each other is as much part of Robbie's desire to date Wendy as is his affection for her. From Wendy's point of view, there is no competition. Dipper is too young for her, which she eventually discusses with him in a later episode ("Bunker"). However, Robbie and Dipper act as if it is up to them to decide who will end up with Wendy or continue to date her.

In "Boyz Crazy" Roby hypnotizes Wendy with his music, causing her to reconsider breaking up with him. Dipper is the one to realize what is going on and ends up freeing Wendy from Robbie's influence. She subsequently breaks up with him and Dipper regards this as his turn to ask her out. In tears, she calls him out on his behavior and effectively puts an end to the competition between Robby and Dipper for her affection. From then on, they simply continue to dislike each other based on past experience.

In most of these episodes, tension comes from the contradictory goals of wanting to prove oneself a man, or an adult, and having to save the day. In order to accomplish the latter, Dipper often has to act in ways that make the former an impossibility. When Robbie and Wendy remark that trick-or-treating is for children (and girls, since neither of them has a problem with Mabel going trick-or-treating), Dipper has to go and collect candy in order to defeat a Halloween monster before it has the chance to

eat the twins and their friends. Eventually, Dipper has to decide what is more important to him, his life or his dignity. He chooses the former and is eventually even able to declare proudly that he went trick-or-treating with his sister (“Summerween”).

Another example can be found in “The Inconveniencing”. Dipper is able to appease the ghosts that haunt the convenience store by putting on a lamb onesie and dancing the embarrassing ‘Lamby Lamby Dance’ like he used to do as a toddler, to which the ghost replies: “That was some fine girlie-dancin’, boy!” ([00:18:30-00:18:34]). Acting like a baby, was the only thing that would save them from the ghosts, and Dipper is further ridiculed for it when even the ghost thinks it was ‘girlie’ behavior.

Unfortunately, Dipper has to show off his Lamby Lamby Dance in front of Wendy, once again sacrificing his dignity to save the day. Wendy, however, understands that it would be social suicide if the others were to learn about Dipper’s actions and decides to lie about what happened:

> LEE: What—what happened after everything went crazy?
> WENDY: You are not going to believe it! The ghosts appeared, and Dipper […] just grabbed a bat and started beating ghosts down, left and right. And then the ghosts got all scared and ran away like a couple of little girls. It was insane.
> (“Inconveniencing” [00:18:57-00:19:17])

Beating up ghosts with a bat is appropriate masculine behavior. Putting on a onesie and performing a silly little dance, however, is not. Not even when it saves somebody’s life.

Dipper always chooses to protect his friends or the town rather than clinging to his pride, sometimes by accepting himself as he is, childish or girlish interests included, and sometimes by embarrassing himself as he did in “The Inconveniencing”. However, these decisions are always short lived. Every new episode carries the potential of a new threat to Dipper’s masculinity and therefore his place in the group, and without fail he tries to change his behavior in order to fit in.

His masculinity is not only threatened by his peers, however. The adults in his life also participate in the policing of his gendered behavior. The following section will investigate the various authority figures and role models in Dipper’s life.

4.4. Role Models and Authority Figures

There is a trend in children's media to portray any kind of authority figure as unreliable, incompetent, or detrimental to the young protagonist's cause. One does not need to look further than such successful properties as *A Series of Unfortunate Events* or the Harry Potter series. In the former, adults tend to disbelieve the Baudelaire siblings about the danger they are facing, and the ones who do believe them have a tendency of getting killed. There is no stability or long-lasting support in stock for them. In Harry Potter, adults ignore warnings, actively sabotage the titular hero, or magically happen to be elsewhere when they are needed most, if they are not trying to kill him in the first place. It is up to Harry and his friends to protect themselves and everyone around them. He, too, encounters a lack of stability and support from authority figures.

In an essay on *Home Alone*, Joe Kincheloe argues that "by the early 1990s social neglect of children had become so commonplace that it could be presented as a comedic motif without raising too many eyebrows" (162). *Home Alone* might be the quintessential narrative of neglectful adults, but this trope is also pervasive in media for both children and young adults. Despite being a reflection of reality as Kincheloe argues (162), children want to see themselves and others their age represented as heroes as well, which can only happen if adults are not up to the task.

Gravity Falls generally follows this trend. There are certain exceptions that will be discussed below but overall it is the children who have to protect the town and each other. Before looking more closely at the three men in Dipper's life that arguably take on the role of caretakers during the single summer in which the show is set, the paper will briefly run through various minor characters that are nominally in a position of power.

True to form, the authority figures and adults seen throughout the show are portrayed as very unreliable. Sheriff Blubs and Deputy Durland are bad at their job and spend their time complementing each other, sleeping in their car or making fun of Dipper. The two FBI agents that appear later in the show are marginally more helpful and do at least take Dipper seriously. However, they know little if anything about the supernatural and have to be protected alongside everybody else. The two subsequent mayors of the town only get shown in passing but do not inspire a great amount of

confidence; the initial mayor appears to have lost his mind to old age and the person who replaces him, Tyler Cutebaker, is mainly shown cheering people on during conflicts and fights, and, as his name already suggests, being cute. Moreover, the parents of the Pine twins are entirely absent. They are only shown once as disembodied arms, reaching into the frame and exchanging Dipper and Mabel's toys with camping gear during a montage that explains their reason for being in Gravity Falls ("Tourist Trapped"). In short, among the myriad of minor characters in positions of power, there is no one who is truly able to support the twins as they protect the town from supernatural entities. Neither are they adequate role models for Dipper or Mabel to look up to.

There are several adults, however, that are specifically entrusted with the twin's care during their summer break in Gravity Falls. The first is Grunkle Stan, who embodies a type of masculinity that Dipper rejects from the get-go. A grifter and con artist, he falls more readily in the category of cautionary tale than role model. However, while he often neglects or outright exploits the children entrusted to his care, he does actually care about them underneath his rough exterior and even has some heroic moments in the course of the narrative. The other older male in character in Dipper's life is Soos, the handyman of the Mystery Shack. He is not tasked with taking care of the twins per se, but often gets dragged into dangerous situations with them and therefore gets thrust into a supportive role whether he intends to or not. He is clumsy and rather simple-minded but offers emotional guidance and nurturing that is otherwise missing in the boy's life. Lastly, there is Grunkle Ford, who was trapped in another dimension until Stan found a way to bring him back. At first, he does not show much of an interest in the rest of the Pines family. As he gets to know Dipper, however, he begins to care for him and wants to take him on as an apprentice, thus appointing himself effectively as his mentor. There are no female caretakes or role models, however, neither for Dipper nor for Mabel. The latter sometimes asks Wendy for advice, but those scenes usually show Wendy's aloofness rather than emotional availability ("The Hand").

The paper will now look at each of the three adult men in Dipper's life in turn.

4.4.1. Grunkle Stan

Stanley Pines is one of the more complex characters of *Gravity Falls*. On the one hand, he is portrayed as an old sleazy crook who cares about nothing as much as he does money. He goes so far as to force Dipper into embarrassing situations if it earns him a few bucks, such as performing for a gullible crowd of tourists as a Wolfboy (a hybrid creature Stan invented) while wearing nothing but shaggy fur pants and wolf ears ("Dungeons"). On the other hand, the twins genuinely care about him and he is sometimes shown to have a softer side, for example when he wants them to spend the day fishing together ("Gobblewonker") or when he tries to take Dipper under his wing and teach him to pick up girls ("Roadside"). These moments, however, are not only far and few between, they are also delivered in a clumsy, rough manner that sometimes backfires. As a rule, Stan does not engage in displays of affection and generally believes in tough love, so much so that at one point Dipper actually thinks Stan hates him ("Dreamscaperers").

In Stan's view of the world, boys and men need to be tough. They should not cry, be overly emotional or scared. He either disregards Dipper's concerns entirely, as he does in "Tourist Trapped" when Dipper worries about the weird things inhabiting the woods, or outright makes fun of him for his perceived shortcomings. For example, when Dipper tries to win a free stack of pancakes in a test of strength, Stan laughs at him for even trying ("Manliness"). Moreover, Stan takes great pleasure in ribbing Dipper, whether it is about his physical weakness ("Manliness") or for being shorter than his sister ("Little Dipper"). Moreover, he treats Mabel differently than Dipper, simply admonishing her when she ruins something with her grappling hook ("Gift Shop"), but continuously yelling at Dipper and always making him do the difficult or even dangerous chores ("Dreamscaperers").

According to Stan, Dipper is too soft and needs to toughen up, so when the boy seemingly talks back at him, he cannot help but be proud. During an episode in which the twins change bodies unbeknownst to Stan, Mabel tries to cause strife between Dipper and their Grunkle to further her own goals. It backfires, because Stan likes and respects that Mabel-as-Dipper is standing up to him and rewards 'him' for it ("Carpet Diem").

Like many authority figures in children's media, Stan is rarely present for Dipper and Mabel's adventures and acts as if he does not believe in the supernatural. As we later come to realize, he has known about the strange happenings in Gravity Falls all along, which turns his blatant disbelief into willful neglect. It being a children's show, *Gravity Falls* dilutes the danger of getting killed by monsters into something more age appropriate. It is a threat implied but never carried out. Characters get trapped in arcade games ("Bottomless") or turned to stone ("Weirdmageddon Part 2") but not outright killed. In the same vein, Stan never has to justify why he does not pay more attention to his charges even though he knows all about the dangers that lurk in the woods. The twins are alive and well after all.

Despite his negligence and ridicule of Dipper, there are moments in which Grunkle Stan actively supports his family and plays the hero. For example, when Mabel's pet pig is carried away by a dinosaur, Stan ends up saving Waddles by punching the creature in the face and proceeds to carry the pig to safety in a baby belt ("Swine"). Even more heroically, in "The Stanchurian Candidate" he saves the children before they can plummet to their death, upon which they call him an actual hero and he has to pretend that he is not moved to tears. He furthermore redeems himself in the finale of the show, when he (temporarily) sacrifices his mind in order to protect his family ("Weirdmageddon Part 3").

Despite the fact that Grunkle Stan does not have to justify his neglect, his behavior is not portrayed as being acceptable. With Dipper as the focal point, the audience empathizes with his emotional turmoil and furthermore knows that the boy is right to be worried about demons and zombies. Stan's brand of toxic masculinity is not something that Dipper aspires to emulate.

4.4.2. Soos

Soos is an adult male in Dipper's life who doubles as his friend as his inadvertent caretaker. In a general sense, he could not be more unreliable. He is simpleminded up to a point where he punches himself unconscious ("Bottomless"), is immensely clumsy, and cares more than anything about eating. His character is designed to look like an overweight rodent, but he acts more like a dog. Once, he is even shown stick-

ing his head out of the car window, tongue lolling out as he enjoys the cool breeze ("Roadside"). None of that inspires much confidence.

On the other hand, he possesses more emotional intelligence than any of the other adults in Dipper's life and continuously offers a sympathetic ear and helpful advice. He is also a source of emotional growth for Dipper, who sometimes needs a push to recognize that he is treating others unfairly ("Swine").

Moreover, Soos has a nurturing side that other male characters lack. When Mabel gets bruised, he cannot help but fuss over it ("Two Stans") and when the twins return scratched and disheveled but triumphant from traveling through time and gift him a wish that may rewrite anything in time without dire consequences, he uses that wish merely to clean and patch them up ("Blendin's Game"). Soos cares deeply about the twins and even comes to explicitly recognize them as family.

Despite his nurturing side and his tendency to follow along with whatever plan Dipper concocts, Soos is not portrayed as a role model. On the one hand, he often acts more like Dipper's peer than his caretaker, even deferring to him in supernatural undertakings. On the other, he ultimately exists as a source of humor because of his weight, simple-mindedness, and clumsiness.

4.4.3. Grunkle Ford

When Grunkle Ford appears through the portal and is revealed to be the author of the mysterious journals ("Dungeons"), Dipper is over the moon with excitement. Ford is the role model that Stan has never been to him. Ford's appearance is reminiscent of gruffy adventurers such as Indiana Jones, which harkens back to a moment in which Dipper has imagined himself to become just such an adventurer himself ("Gobblewonker"). No matter what Ford does, the children, but especially Dipper, admire him for it. The act of switching a broken light bulb with one of his own design causes Dipper, Mabel and Soos to regard him with awe. Dipper goes so far as to comment offhandedly that Ford would make a great mayor of Gravity Falls ("Stanchurian"). Dipper wants nothing more than to spend time with his hero, compare notes, and learn from him. Here is finally is a person in his life that shares his interests and values intelligence as much as he does.

From Dipper's point of view, the mentor-mentee relationship is established at first sight. Ford, however, has his reservations. He wants to focus on defeating Bill Cipher and does not want any distractions. Furthermore, Stan asks him to leave the children out of his quest and Ford initially agrees with him ("Dungeons"). On the other hand, Ford recognizes Dipper's intelligence and contribution to the cause. This results in some very mixed signals. Ford knows that his quest is a very dangerous undertaking and acts coldly and brusquely where Dipper is concerned, effectively hurting his feelings. At the same time, he appreciates a like-minded individual and bonds with Dipper over their favorite and titular game of the episode "Dungeons, Dungeons & More Dungeons".

Ford's resolve to keep Dipper out of the fight against Bill erodes quickly. While he does not spend much time with Mabel, he does come to care for Dipper and wants the boy to become his apprentice. However, becoming Ford's apprentice would entail dropping out of school and leaving Mabel behind. Dipper is naturally torn on the subject; everything he has ever dreamed of versus the people he loves ("vs. the Future"). Dipper gets a small taste of what being an apprentice under Ford would be like when the two of them explore an alien spaceship buried near the town. As stated previously, they get attacked by drones that respond to adrenaline surges and Ford instructs him to focus on his intellect and conquer his fear. Eventually Dipper manages to control his emotions and the two of them escape with their lives intact.

This echoes many coming of age narratives in fantasy and action genres, in which "courage is often conflated with fearlessness" (McIntosh, "Emotional Expression" [00:09:40-00:09:45]). Boys and young men have to control their emotions, bury them deep, in order to become accepted as heroes.

Ford is the hardened adventurer who does not feel fear and relies on his pure intellect and physical prowess to fight supernatural evils, and he wants Dipper to be able to do the same. Before there can be any more talk about apprenticeships, however, Mabel gets tricked into letting Bill into their dimension, thus triggering the drawn-out final showdown ("vs. the Future"). Ford is easily thwarted by Bill and has to be freed along with everybody else by Dipper, Mabel and their friends. Ultimately, his promise to protect them remains unfulfilled and it is up to the young protagonists to figure out a way to save Ford, instead of the other way around.

Looking at these three caretakers in Dipper's life, they each try in their own way to support or guide him, but ultimately fall short of providing stability or even a safe environment. Dipper and Mabel continuously have to step up and do the adults' job for them, acting as the heroes that the town needs.

The next section will now turn towards aspects of heroic masculinities and analyze how they relate to Dipper and other characters of the show.

4.5. Heroic Masculinity

Heroes have always been a cornerstone of Western storytelling. The ideal hero combines "physical size, strength, charisma, pronounced facial features, aggressive behavior, and the ability to generate action" (Gallagher 162). Dipper Pines embodies almost none of that. He is small and skinny, as well as scared and hesitant. The one thing he does have, however, is the aforementioned "ability to generate action." Echoing generic transformations, the cartoon does not reproduce the lone hero's journey but resembles much more the popular group ensembles or buddy narratives, as he is often accompanied by his sister Mabel, if not always by their friends Soos and Wendy, or even their Grunkles. That, too, is different from the classic heroic ideal: the women of *Gravity Falls* are heroes too. Nonetheless, Dipper is the one character who is most often called a hero and who happily makes it his duty to save the day continuously.

If we look at the archetypal formula by Bilz (1) that was cited in full in section 3.2., many of the criteria seem to fit Dipper Pines: He has several enemies, most notably Gideon Gleeful and Bill Cipher; allies help him save the day numerous times; he constantly faces obstacles and continues to have to prove himself; he receives warnings vis the journal, i.e. "trust no one" ("Tourist Trapped"); he faces the potential loss of his body, autonomy, or life on several occasion, mostly during the season finales; and his rewards, one could argue, are a deeper understanding of the supernatural, a supportive community, and the respect of an entire town. Dipper's journey, too, follows the formula. He leaves the known world of his hometown and is thrust into a strange forest filled with supernatural creatures; he constantly has to face supernatural obstacles and has to prove his worth, his maturity; and after all is said and done, he returns home to his parents at the end of the summer. Thus, Dipper resembles the

archetypal hero even if he falls short of the toxic ideal that has become entrenched in the action and adventure genres.

In a mystery/fantasy/adventure show such as *Gravity Falls* there are plenty of opportunities where one needs to save the day, the town, or the world. Moreover, Dipper himself actively wants to be seen as a hero and adventurer. In "The Legend of the Gobblewonker," he imagines what would happen if he managed to get photographic proof of the existence of a monster. In this phantasy scene, he is dressed like Indiana Jones, gets interviewed by a radio host about his adventurous lifestyle, and receives an award for his service. This theme is repeated in "Land Before Swine" in which Dipper and Soos want to take a picture of a creature for glory and female attention:

> DIPPER: There's something hiding in these woods. Something big enough to rip the roof off a car. If we get a photo of this thing we'll be heroes!
> SOOS: Yeah, we'll get all the babes. You'll be fending off smooches with a stick!
> ("Swine" [00:03:33-00:03:43])

It is not just Dipper who likes to imagine himself as a hero. Other characters encourage it as well. Mabel, for example, tells him that he is a hero because "[he] defeated a giant robot with nothing but [his] bare hands" ("Gideon Rises" [00:21:56-00:22:00]). Female characters, on the other hand, rarely receive the illustrious title of 'hero' despite being heroic themselves. Mabel, who continuously helps and even saves her brother, receives such high praise only once from their friends (and then only indirectly), when Wendy emboldens Dipper by telling him that he and Mabel can do anything, even save the universe ("Weirdmageddon Part 1"). Credit mainly goes to Dipper, and sometimes to Ford and Stan.

It is not always Dipper himself who has to do the saving or does not have to do it by himself. He usually stumbles across the problem before other people, but then often needs or has to be saved himself. Dipper is the first to learn about Gideon's villainous side, but then is saved from certain death by Mabel when the fighting takes the boys over the side of a cliff ("The Hand"). After Dipper saves Mabel when she gets kidnapped by gnomes, it is Mabel's plan that lets them defeat their opponents together ("Tourist Trapped").

Sometimes, Dipper even causes the problem himself and subsequently needs help cleaning it up. In "Scary-oke," for example, he raises a horde of zombies to prove to

the FBI that the supernatural is real, and then needs Mabel's help in getting rid of them.

The big end-of-season showdowns are usually a group affair, too. It takes both Dipper and Mabel to defeat and survive Gideon Gleeful's giant robot at the end of season one, and then Grunkle Stan's interference is needed so that the twins do not end up in jail ("Gideon Rises"). Even more crowded is the finale of season two. The only way to stop Bill is to take part in a ritual that can only be performed by the current residents of Gravity Falls: the Pines family, Soos and Wendy, Pacifica Northwest, Robbie, Gideon Gleeful and Old Man McGucket ("Weirdmageddon Part 3").

In the day-to-day adventures, however, Dipper has many opportunities to shine on his own. As mentioned above, he saves Mabel from being kidnapped by gnomes ("Tourist Trapped") and being kidnapped and trapped by Gideon ("Weirdmageddon Part 2"), saves Wendy from Robbie's mind control ("Boyz Crazy"), or the Northwest family from a ghost ("Northwest"), to name but a few. He enjoys being a hero and likes to define his own worth as well as his gendered behavior according to traditionally heroic conventions.

When it comes to the heroic body, *Gravity Falls* does not emulate entertainment products aimed at adults. Dipper's sacrifices are not always physical in nature. Even though the male body *is* an important element in the show, it is used less as a tool to fight the supernatural and more as a reminder that Dipper falls short of the masculine ideal. One notable instance in which the conflict is carried out across the hero's body, however, is Dipper's fight with a video game character. In order to defeat Robbie, who challenges Dipper to a fight, Dipper brings the video game fighter Rumble to life to fight in his stead. But Rumble does not fight just to intimidate, he fights until the other person can no longer stand up, until the other person is dead. Realizing his mistake, Dipper challenges Rumble before he can seriously harm Robbie and lets himself get beaten up to protect Robbie from a worse fate ("Fight Fighter"). Being a traditional hero means sacrificing oneself in order to protect others.

He also gets into several fist fights with Gideon Gleeful. In "Gideon Rises," he is faced with a giant Gideon-shaped robot and for a moment does not believe he can defeat him. Gideon taunts him to a point where Dipper almost starts crying. For a moment it looks like Dipper is giving up, being crushed by the negative words Gideon

has said to him, but then he rallies, jumps off a cliff and dives through the window that is the robot's eye, tackles Gideon to the ground and proceeds to fight him. In his need to protect his sister and the town, Dipper faces not only a physical altercation but potential death as well when he subsequently falls from a great height.

More often, however, Dipper's sacrifices lie in different areas. Sometimes, he has to sacrifice his dignity, for example by performing his embarrassing Lamby Lamby dance to appease a couple of ghosts, or performing 'reverse CPR' on Mermando, i.e. pouring water from his mouth into Mermando's when the merman has been on dry land for too long ("Deep End"). Other times he has to sacrifice his personal goals such as his perceived chance with Wendy in order to reunite his sister with her pet pig ("Pig").

In conclusion, *Gravity Falls* does not reiterate the classic hero ideal, but rather transforms it to be more inclusive. Whereas Dipper often saves the day with his brain rather than brawn, he also needs to be saved in turn or has to rely on other people for the implementation of his plans. He is furthermore the cause of several of the problems he then has to solve, and while he does get his moments of personal victory, he is not the only character that shines.

Dipper's day-to-day heroics are often supplemented by opportunities to grow as a person, mainly in emotional ways in his altercations with Mabel. The following section will analyze a number of instances that afford Dipper and other characters that chance to grow.

4.6. Emotional Growth

The creative team of *Gravity Falls* takes great care to pepper the show with emotional learning experiences for Dipper. He often struggles to find a balance between being self-absorbed or stoic, and showing compassion and vulnerability. What makes matters more difficult is that he is constantly ridiculed by other male characters for the latter, as we have already seen. Nevertheless, there are many situations in which he learns to express and become more conscious of his emotions and those of others.

Dipper's emotional growth tends to happen in communication and through arguments with Mabel because she is the person he shares most aspects of his life with. He has an easier time expressing hurt feelings when it comes to her and she also does not

make fun of him for it when he does. Sharing a room at the Shack and therefore living in each other's pockets often leads to friction and subsequent heart-to-hearts. At one point, Dipper confronts Mabel about the fact that she has been teasing him all day about being taller than him, which turns into a moment of growth for both of them. She confesses that she believes he is always better at everything and that she finally had the feeling that she was "winning at something for once" ("Little Dipper" [00:16:57-00:17:17]). It takes courage to admit to one's hurt feelings and vulnerabilities, but when it is just Mabel, Dipper is willing to open up. In "Carpet Diem," Mabel keeps having sleepovers with her friends, after which the twins end up in separate bedrooms. However, neither of them is comfortable on their own and Dipper eventually confesses that he feels constantly left behind when Mabel spends so much time with Candy and Grenda. They decide to keep sharing a room at the end of their talk. Emotional talks certainly happen most frequently between Mabel and Dipper but are not the only instances of emotional growth for Dipper.

Another person Dipper has a noteworthy heart-to-heart with is Wendy. Despite only confessing his feelings to Wendy when he believes her to be dead—which is understandable, given that confessing one's romantic feelings, especially as a pre-adolescent or teenager, is very difficult—some emotional growth *does* follow his confession. Wendy needs Dipper to accept that they are not going to be dating because she is much too old for him (something he has conveniently overlooked in the past), which he reluctantly does. She then assures him that she still cares about him:

> WENDY: […] This summer was super boring until you showed up. I have more fun with you than practically anybody else. And if you ever stopped being my friend…I would, like, throw myself into the Bottomless Pit!
> ("Bunker" [00:20:02-00:20:14).

While being sad that Wendy does not want to date him, in his heart he has known all along that it would never happen. He can accept and even cherish that she wants to be his friend.

Being a child, it is not surprising that it is much easier for Dipper to care about his own feelings than those of others. He does not always recognize (or care) when he is hurting those around him and sometimes needs a little push. Next to Mabel, Soos is Dipper's biggest source of emotional growth. The gentle and simpleminded handyman has a big capacity for empathy and possesses more emotional intelligence than other male characters. He is not afraid of expressing a more feminine, maternal side

of himself (see section 4.4.2. for a more detailed discussion). On occasion, he helps Dipper realize when the boy has been too self-absorbed or mean to others. In "The Time Traveler's Pig," Mabel wins her pet pig Waddles at the fair and instantly falls in love with it. Meanwhile, Dipper thinks he finally has a chance to spend time with Wendy and maybe even ask her out. When he accidentally hits her in the eye with a baseball, he uses a device to reverse time and change the outcome. In doing so, other circumstances change as well, and Mabel loses her pig. Even though Dipper realizes that Mabel's feelings are hurt, he still believes that his 'shot' with Wendy is more important than a pig. Soos is the one who makes him realize that it is not right to make Mabel suffer for his own personal gain, prompting Dipper to stop his manipulations of time.

But it is not only Dipper who gets a chance to grow. Gideon Gleeful, for example, who accepts in the end that love cannot be forced ("Weirdmageddon Part 1"), even though he has been trying to force Mabel to fall in love with him by all means necessary in the past. Grunkle Stan, too, receives opportunities to grow. As mentioned before, Stan develops compassion for Waddles the pig when its life is in danger and transports it to safety in a baby belt, which humorously suggests the existence of paternal feelings ("Swine"). Moreover, he can on occasion be coaxed into a hug and even succumbs to tears ("Stanchurian"). The latter of which, however, he staunchly denies. It could be argued that it is therefore a physically reflexive expression of his emotions, something he cannot help because he is simply overcome, rather than actual emotional growth.

Moreover, Stan's biggest moment of emotional vulnerability happens indirectly. He is only tough on Dipper because he loves him and wants him to be strong enough to face the world. Dipper stumbles across this notion while traversing Stan's mind after thinking that his Grunkle hates him. Stan therefore does not need to express his love for Dipper directly, even if he did openly talk about it with Soos ("Dreamscaperers"). Stan's capacity for empathy remains limited even though he does come to cherish his family more by the end of the show. It is easier for him to express his emotions through actions, by saving the twins from plummeting to their death or by punching a dinosaur in the face, rather than by showing vulnerability, echoing the 'bully society' he grew up in and remains a part of.

The next section of this paper turns away from toxic masculinities and takes a closer look at diversity portrayed on *Gravity Falls*.

4.7. Diverse Masculinities

All things considered, *Gravity Falls* is not a very diverse show, whether it comes to gender, sexuality or race/ethnicity. There are a few reoccurring characters that break the mold, such as Sheriff Blubs, who is black and queer, or Mabel's friends Candy and Grenda. The former is Japanese and the latter a very masculine girl when it comes to physical appearance and her voice. Interestingly enough, Grenda is the only child in Dipper's age group who ends up in a serious relationship, dating a very feminine Austrian baron ("Northwest").

Instead of investigating every minor occurrence of a diverse character, this section will focus on two aspects that play a bigger role on *Gravity Falls*. The first part of this section looks at Latino characters specifically, because one of the major characters is Latino: Soos. The second part analyses homosexuality on *Gravity Falls*, because it is used as a reoccurring source for humor.

4.7.1. Latino Characters

The most notable Latino character on the show is Soos. His racial depiction, however, comes with several issues attached. The first being that he appears to be white until the end of the first season, when we learn that he lives with his grandmother who only speaks broken English ("Gideon Rises"). However, the fact that he is Latino additionally to being the handyman and janitor of the Mystery Shack makes this another stereotypical portrayal in the long tradition of showing Latino characters as custodial staff or blue-collar workers. The end of the show mitigates this racial stereotype somewhat, when Stan and Ford hand over the ownership of the Shack to Soos so they can travel the world together ("Gideon Rises"). Other stereotypes include depicting Latinos as unintelligent or "objects of ridicule" (Tukachinsky 541). As was previously mentioned, Soos is rather simpleminded and often ridiculed for his weight and clumsiness, thus embodying more than one negative Latino stereotype.

However, Soos is not the only Latino character on *Gravity Falls*. In "The Deep End," Mabel has a crush on the Latino merman Mermando, who is trapped in the town's

public pool. Despite being only 12-years-old he looks fully-grown and has the voice of an adult male. He has long wavy hair that instantly catches Mable's eye. Mermando is depicted as somewhat feminine, trapped in a pool and lamenting his situation through song, as well as giggling with Mabel as they comb each other's hair. This seems to both evoke the exotic lover stereotype—through his attractive adult male body—as well as undermine it—through feminine behavior. What is more, the show does not make use of machismo and its features of "dominance, assertiveness, aggressiveness, and the valuing of physical strength and courage," as well as the devaluation of women (Mora 438), that often accompany the Latin lover trope.

Even though Latino stereotypes seem to be partially subverted here, but the depiction of Latino characters on the whole remains problematic. Apart from Soos cleaning toilets for a living ("Tourist Trapped"), Stan has Latino prison mates ("Dreamscaperers") and works with a Mexican criminal for one of his cons ("Mabelcorn"), thus making use of another stereotype that characterizes Latinos as criminals (Tukachinsky 541). In sum, there are no unambiguously positive portrayals of male Latino characters on *Gravity Falls*[3].

Only one scene suggests that the creators of the show are concerned with racism. The scene in question also revolves around Mermando, but the issue is shifted from skin color to the privilege of having legs. When Mabel tries to bond with Mermando, she shows him photographs of her summer and unwittingly acts offensive in the process:

> MABEL: Look! Here's a scrapbook of human stuff. Here's me standing with my legs. And here I am kicking Dipper in *his* legs. He couldn't move his legs after that! Can you imagine? Not having legs?
> MERMANDO: Let's skip this part.
> MABEL: And here's my whole family kickboxing!
> (emphasis added by the original voice acting, "Deep End" [00:11:03-00:11:18])

She does not realize her privilege as she excessively talks about something Mermando does not have and can never experience. It has to be pointed out to her. Because this is the first instance in which Mabel shows off her scrapbook or, indeed, talks about legs, the show thus makes an explicit comment about the casual racism that even well-meaning and open-minded people engage in. The problem remains,

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[3] On a side note, there are no univocally positive depictions of black characters either. Whereas Sheriff Blubs' incompetence could simply be judged in terms of the show's depiction of all law enforcement officer as being incompetent, the problem remains that there are no unproblematic portrayals of race or sexuality to be found.

however, that apart from this brief moment of awareness, the show continues to portray racially diverse characters by using negative stereotypes.
Moreover, racially diverse characters are far and few between. Apart from Soos (and perhaps Sheriff Blubs) there are no other diverse characters of note.

4.7.2. Homosexuality

Disney's censorship practices are very rigorous when it comes to homosexuality. Even the inclusion of a same-sex couple in the ensemble of background characters gets cut more often than not. Only recently did the entertainment giant loosen its stance on the issue, for example allowing two men to dance with each other in Bill Condon's live-action reboot of *Beauty and the Beast*. It remains to be seen whether changing LeFou into a gay character is an outlier or the sign of lasting change. During the production of the *Gravity Falls* episode "The Love God", however, Disney was still very strict in their censoring. When one of the artists on the creative team added a lesbian couple to the ensemble of characters that were supposed to fall in love because of the interference of the Roman god Cupid, the scene had to be cut despite Hirsch's best efforts (Kaiser).
On the show, the notion of homosexuality is for the most part only allowed in parody, its possibility implied but either ignored or outright disavowed. There are many examples in which homosexuality is used as a source of humor. In "The Golf War" there is a moment where Soos and Stan wait in the car for the twins. It is dark and the radio plays romantic music; Stan tries to nap while a shirtless Soos sits in the passenger seat staring at him and saying, "sure are a lot of stars out tonight" ([00:11:56-00:11:58]). This scene is charged with a homosexual subtext that Stan cannot bear. He quickly gets out of the car with a "this is getting weird" thrown at his employee ([00:11:58-00:12:00]). While this may be a source of humor for the audience, it is much more than that. Soos' behavior is framed here as inappropriate and creepy, something that *naturally* makes other men uncomfortable—so much so that they have to remove themselves from the situation entirely.
Other scenes *are* included only for laughs, however, and do not make other characters uncomfortable. Consider the two FBI agents Powers and Trigger, who dress and act like a married couple while undercover ("Northwest"), or the two police officers,

Sheriff Blubs and Deputy Durland, whose working relationship is portrayed more as a romantic partnership. The trend to show law enforcement as romantic couples of course pokes fun at the homosocial bonds in numerous buddy cop narratives. However, in the case of Blubs and Durland, *Gravity Falls* turned the subtext more and more into text as the series went on: Whereas in season one the pair only plan to go on vacation together ("Irrational") or put lotion on each other at the public pool ("Deep End"), by the end of season two they openly express their love for each other:

> DEPUTY DURLAND: […] We're mad with power!
> SHERIFF BLUBS AND DEPUTY DURLAND: (*They grab a hold of each other's faces.*) And *love*!
> ("Weirdmageddon Part 3" [00:12:27-00:12:30])

Their implied feelings for each other are not explicitly confirmed for most of the show due to the above-mentioned censorship practices of Disney. The tight restrictions loosened somewhat towards the end of production, according to Hirsch: "I didn't stop trying. In the last episode, I had the two police officers, Blubs and Durland, flat out say they loved each other, and I didn't get a single [censorship] note" (Kaiser).

To reiterate, *Gravity Falls* is not a very diverse show, even though in some (i.e. queer) cases the creators tried to do better. Often the only tool that remains at their disposal was parody; jokes about homosexuality seem to be alright with Disney's censorship department. It has to be noted here that none of the characters of the show make fun of the heavily implied homosexual characters; they only ridicule femininity in perceived straight characters like Dipper. It is the structure of the show rather than individual characters that frames homosexual behavior as something to be ridiculed in a much more systematic manner.

Gender nonconformity can also be found in one of *Gravity Fall*'s villains, Gideon Gleeful, who will be discussed alongside Bill Cipher in the next section of the paper.

4.8. Devious Masculinity

There is a tradition within Disney movies that portrays villains as what Putnam calls "transgendered:" women are shown as "de-feminized" and men as effeminate (148). When it comes to male characters, she lists villains such as *The Lion King*'s Scar, *Aladdin*'s Jafar or *Pocahontas*' Ratcliffe. The Disney Channel, too, seems to follow that tradition, at least where *Gravity Falls* is concerned.

Gideon Gleeful, the main villain of season one, does not conform to traditional masculinity. He does not always behave in an overtly feminine way; he also acts like a toddler, which once again conflates age with gendered behavior. He is often seen to throw temper tantrums (“Little Dipper”), pretends to be a cute, innocent child to emotionally manipulate others (“Gideon Rises”), and demands to be carried or cleaned by the adults around him (“Little Dipper”). His body is designed to be undesirable as well; small, pudgy and pig-like, he even sometimes grunts like the animal when he messily consumes food (“Little Dipper”). His behavior not only undermines the authority he wants to have over others, but it also marks him as unfit to be a serious or even attractive partner for any character, let alone the female lead.

Above all, however, Gideon often acts in markedly female ways. In “The Hand that Rocked the Mabel” he shows Mabel his pink dressing room filled not only with clothes and accessories traditionally for men, but also for women, such as a feather boa or a ruffled skirt, and proceeds to give her a make-over off-screen (“The Hand”). He carries hair spray with him wherever he goes (“Little Dipper”), reportedly tried to steal Wendy’s moisturizer (“Dreamscaperers”) and wears a hairnet (“Stanchurian”). While stuck in prison, he engages in past times also clearly associated with girls or women, making a dress with Mabel in mind and braiding friendship bracelets along with other inmates (“Stanchurian”). His feminine concerns and interests disqualify him from the illustrious category of males altogether. Other characters equate him with femininity numerous times. As mentioned above, Mabel initially enjoyed his company as she would a “friend-slash-little sister” (“The Hand” [00:12:09-00:12:11]) and when the twins bargain with the gnomes they offer Gideon up as a prettier queen than Mabel (“Gideon Rises”). The gnomes, in turn, openly call Gideon a queen and comically do not believe him when he shouts in a high-pitched voice that he is not a woman (“Gideon Rises”). His own thoughts on the matter of his gender and sexuality are ignored and overruled in favor of what the society he lives in deems valid.

More problematic becomes the fact that a villain is the only major character to portray such nonconformity, because it equates cruel or devious behavior with gender nonconformity: “By creating only wicked characters as transgendered, Disney constructs an implicit evaluation of transgenderism, unequivocally associating it with cruelty, selfishness, brutality, and greed” (Putnam 149). Gideon Gleeful possesses all of

these negative qualities: He casts himself as the arch nemesis of Stan and wants to get his hands on the Shack because he believes that one of the journals (of which he possesses the second book) is buried somewhere on the property. He is cruel toward those who oppose him, especially his parents, going so far as to traumatize his mother ("Little Dipper") and mind controlling his father ("Stanchurian"). He wants the power of all the journals for himself and does not shy away from tricking or outright stealing to get what he wants.

What is more damning, however, and more tightly linked to toxic masculinity, is his selfish treatment of Mabel. When they meet for the first time, he takes advantage of Mabel's kindness and unwillingness to hurt his feelings, successfully pushing her into dating him. He subsequently stages their date in such a way that social pressure forces her to agree to another date. Being somewhat of a celebrity, eyes follow him wherever he goes and so does the media. When he delivers an elaborate invitation to the ball at a restaurant, all the patrons gather around their table and wait for her answer. Again and again he maneuvers her into situations in which she cannot deny him and it is Dipper who offers to break up with him for her. Gideon does not accept the breakup and believes that Dipper came between them. Even when she finally confronts him herself, he does not accept her choice. His obsession with her gains serial-killer-esque overtones when he builds dolls of the twins and plays around with them, as well as curates a wall of photos of Mabel ("The Hand"). His infatuation is the only thing that matters to him.

Gideon kidnaps or traps both Dipper and Mabel on various occasions. When he does so, he tends to offer Mabel her freedom in exchange for becoming his queen. When twins have an unfortunate incident with a shrinking ray, Gideon traps them in a mason jar and tells Mabel that he "wouldn't hurt a hair on [her] itty-bitty head…if [she agrees] to be [his] queen" ("Little Dipper" [00:09:47-00:09:52]). This motif is repeated when he snatches her up with his giant robot and declares that he will rule the town with her by his side ("Gideon Rises"), or when he offers to spare her in his upcoming plans if she agreed to be his ("Stanchurian"). Not taking no for an answer more than anything connects him firmly with toxic and predatory masculinity.

Gideon may not be the only feminine male character on *Gravity Falls*, but others only have very minor appearances and remain ultimately unnecessary to the narrative.

There is Tyler Cutebaker for one, who has feminine eyelashes and a high-pitched scream, and who becomes mayor of Gravity Falls, or the law enforcement officers mentioned in the previous section. What mitigates Putnam's argument somewhat, however, is the fact that Gideon receives a redemption arc n season two. When the more dangerous villain Bill Cipher threatens to destroy Gravity Falls, Dipper can convince Gideon to help them and let Mabel go free.

> GIDEON: […] Mabel is *mine*!
> DIPPER: Gideon, listen to me, if I've learned anything this summer it's that you can't force someone to love you. The best you can do is strive to be someone worthy of loving.
> GIDEON: Oh, I'm worthy of loving! These prisoners love me!
> DIPPER: But Mabel doesn't. Because you're selfish. But you can change! Bill thinks there's no heroes in this world, but if we work together and fight back, we *can* defeat him. You wanna be Mabel's hero? Stand up to Bill and let us save her!
> […]
> DIPPER: Look inside, Gideon. If all this is for Mabel, then ask yourself what Mabel would want you to do.
> GIDEON: (*He studies a photo of them and sees how uncomfortable Mabel appears to be. He wavers*.) Dipper. Will you tell her what I did?
> ("Weirdmageddon Part 1" [00:20:31-00:21:36])

Gideon finally recognizes how uncomfortable Mabel has been in his presence and realizes that he cannot win her over like that. In the end he goes so far as to say that he is now on the straight and narrow, though the show suggests that he is expressing his violent and megalomaniac urges in other ways, namely by siccing his former prison inmates turned loyal minions on other children that bully him ("Weirdmageddon Part 4"). Even though his gender performance remains undesirable until the very end, he becomes at least a reluctantly accepted part of the community.

The other main villain, Bill Cipher, does not transgress binary gender norms, but rather reality itself. He is violent and destructive, cares only about spreading chaos and mayhem. His voice and appearance (a top hat and a bowtie) cause others to view him as masculine despite the fact that he is a dream demon and gender might not be the same for Bill as for us. His non-human, triangle-shaped body radiates more masculine energy than Gideon's, or even Dipper's body. He, too, performs toxic masculinity but does not possess any redeeming qualities. He does not afford women the same respect as he does men, calling Wendy "Red" ([00:13:02-00:13:02]) or "toots" ([00:13:31-00:13:31]) in "Sock Opera". He also judges the gendered bodies around

him, calling Grenda "a monster" under his breath for being so masculine ("Sock Opera" [00:15:11-00:15:12]). In this he is similar to Stan, who hurts Grenda's feeling by asking her if her deep voice is due to a cold ("Summerween"). Bill's misogyny receives no comment. It seems to pale in light of his acts of torture and manipulation and is therefore easily shrugged off and forgotten.

Bill is a master manipulator, twisting words and giving just enough information to get people to make deals with him. For example, he once tricked Ford into building a machine that would let him cross over from the Nightmare Realm he used to be trapped in ("Mabelcorn"). When Bill cannot sweet-talk or trick others into compliance, he terrifies or tortures them.

Moreover, he routinely takes away the autonomy of other characters, by penetrating their minds and bodies without their fully informed consent. He enters Stan's mind to steal the code to his safe for Gideon ("Dreamscaperers"), and tricks Dipper into handing over his own body, which leads to Bill wearing him like a meat suit while Dipper is trapped in a ghost-like state ("Sock Opera"). His performance of toxic masculinity is taken to the extreme while still remaining appropriate for the show's young audience and is reminiscent of predatory masculinity of villains pillaging, raping and killing their way across narratives aimed at adults.

In sum, the two major villains of *Gravity Falls* are both examples of toxic masculinity, disregarding other people's agency first and foremost. However, whereas Bill's gendered behavior only ever remains traditionally masculine, Gideon's also transgresses binary norms and is constantly policed because of it. Bill just has to be stopped; Gideon has to be stopped as well as reminded of his gender transgressions.

4.9. Summary

As the detailed analysis above has shown, the gendered behavior of boys and men is an important aspect of *Gravity Falls*. Their gender performance is routinely policed, commented upon and parodied. The question that arises from such parody is whether said commentary can be regarded as criticism, and if so, criticism of what exactly? Are we meant to judge traditional displays of masculinity, the feminine behavior of some men, or both?

Parody is an important tool in gender-related activism because it "denaturalizes culturally embedded gendered practices" and makes them visible for subsequent discussion (Pullen and Rhodes 513). This is true for *Gravity Falls* as well. The constant parody of boys and men enables a discussion of gender performance. It denaturalizes both feminine practices such as makeovers as well as masculine practices like excessive workouts.

I would argue, however, that only *certain* gender performances are opened up for discussion or scrutiny, not masculinity, or gender, per se. As we have seen, Ford's insistence that Dipper learn to master his emotions, for example, is not called into question. The casual equation of men with heroism is likewise never discussed. Even though women save the day on numerous occasions—and are, indeed, appreciated for it—they are never called 'heroes' themselves. So while certain gendered behavior is dragged into the light, other behavior—traditionally masculine behavior—receives structural approval and thus remains invisible and natural.

Furthermore, Wooden and Gillam argue that parody only temporarily challenges social hierarchies but does not permanently undermine them. Parody relies on the expectations of the audience, the knowledge of contemporary and past norms of masculinity. Temporary parody will not upset the norms, because we return to the normative order once the laughter dies down (34). Temporarily laughing at Mr. Pool Check's Type A personality ("Deep End") does not mitigate the fact that Dipper's reportedly weak body falls short of the ideal and that the audience is constantly reminded of it as well. *Gravity Falls*, then, invites discussions about gender performance, but remains blind to the gendered behavior it reiterates and condones.

Let us now turn to the analysis of *Steven Universe*, where gendered performance is dealt with differently.

5. *Steven Universe*

Steven Universe is an action/fantasy/science fiction cartoon created by Rebecca Sugar for Cartoon Network. The first episode aired in 2013 and as of this writing 160 episodes have been released in five seasons. No sixth season has yet been announced but neither has a cancellation of the show. It remains to be seen whether the series can be classified as ongoing or not. That being said, it would go far beyond

the scope of this paper to analyze all 160 episodes. For that reason, only the first season will be taken into account, which comprises 52 episodes in total.

At the center of the show is the eponymous Steven Universe, a 12-year-old boy who is half human, half alien. He lives in the small fictional town of Beach City with Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl, who are all part of an alien race called the Gems—rock people with humanoid forms and magical abilities. Together they call themselves the 'Crystal Gems' and protect the Earth from their own kind who want to colonize the planet. Steven's mother Rose Quartz was the leader of the Crystal Gems before she decided to give up her physical form to bring Steven into the world. In doing so she passed her magical abilities on to him. Much of the show revolves around a coming of age narrative with a focus on Steven exploring and learning control over his powers. By his side are also his human father Greg Universe, who is an unsuccessful musician and owner of the local car wash, and Connie Maheswaran, a bookworm of a girl that lives in a nearby city and Steven's best friend and crush. Major supporting characters are also the teenagers Sadie and Lars, who work at the local donut shop Big Donut.

Even though gender on *Steven Universe* is not such an explicitly policed or parodied subject matter as on *Gravity Falls*, it is still one of the themes most carefully considered by the creators. What is crafted here is the notion that there is (or should be) a balance of feminine and masculine traits within both men and women. Steven himself has the most notable balance between feminine and masculine personality traits. On the one hand, he is caring and nurturing, cooking breakfast or throwing parties for his family, helping others, and trying to keep the peace. On the other hand, he is very active and enjoys masculine sports such as wrestling or Japanese sword fights. He wants to be a hero and save the world. He is both creative, plays the ukulele and always makes up songs on the spot, as well as smart, often having creative solutions to the problems at hand. Above all, however, he is a child, and often messes up in a childlike fashion when he tries to impress his family and friends. His alien caregivers, but especially Pearl, try to shelter him from the dangers the life of a Crystal Gem brings with it. This echoes the belief that took root in the 19th century which views childhood as a utopian time free from adult worries and insists that children are inno-

cent and have to be protected from the corrupting and dangerous influences of adult society (Ariès 56, Calvert 79), or in this case, Gem society.

In terms of gender, the Gems are worth noting as well. Gems do not conform to human conceptions of gender and are moreover sexless. They take on female humanoid forms because they chose to do so (Tishma). Some of them show more masculine traits, such as Jasper (to be discussed in section 5.3.) while others appear to be distinctly feminine.

As stated above, one important aspect of gender on *Steven Universe* is that of balance and Steven embodies that balance more explicitly than other characters. He is, however, not the only one. Characters such as Greg or Garnet also show a balanced mixture of feminine and masculine traits. Greg once lived the masculine dream of a rock star, if an unsuccessful one, and now acts as the 'breadwinner' for Steven. But he is also in tune with his emotions and generally very open about them, showing his love for Steven freely (Tishma). Garnet, on the other hand, is in reality a fusion of two individual Gems (something that all Gems can do to increase their power), Ruby and Sapphire. The former is portrayed as a very masculine Gem with a temper, while the latter is very calm and soothing. As Tishma points out, their appearance suggests a very binary division of gender as well, with a short-haired Ruby wearing pants and Sapphire in a dress and long hair flowing down her back. By living in a fused state, Garnet literally embodies both masculine and feminine extremes. Instead of warring sides, however, the love of these Gems for each other creates a balance that makes Garnet stronger than the other Crystal Gems. Characters that are not as balanced, like Lars and Jasper, are shown to be unhappy, mean or outright violent. Thus, even though gendered behavior is not policed or ridiculed, it is very carefully designed with a clear message in mind: balance is key.

The following analysis will look more closely at these and other aspects, starting with Steven's body and heroism, before taking a brief look at traditional masculinity. After that, the analysis will then turn to the feminine themes in Steven's life, such as his capacity as mediator or his Gem powers, before taking a brief look at his numerous guardians.

5.1. Body

As discussed in the theory section, hard bodies are an important aspect of traditional masculinity. Heroes, warriors, soldiers—all value a well-defined torso. For the modern hero, the body is the ultimate weapon and much of the conflicts in contemporary action, adventure and their hybrid genres are carried out across the hero's body (Gibson 105, Tasker 125-128). Masculinity is so tied up with the body that manhood becomes conflated with it (Kimmel, *Manhood* 127). Not so much on *Steven Universe*, however. Here, it is female bodies that are buff and well-defined, not those of men. Garnet, for example, is the Crystal Gem whose body conforms the most to heroic body ideals. She is tall, buff, and uses her fists as weapons. On occasion, Amethyst shapeshifts into a muscled body, too, for example turning herself into a wrestler ("Tiger Millionaire") or a buff version of Steven ("Coach Steven"). Additionally, antagonistic Gems such as Jasper not only have the excessive body of a soldier, but also the aggressive and violent masculinity to go with it ("The Return"). Steven, on the other hand, does not have an idealized body. He is small and pudgy, with no hard boundaries or edges. The hardest thing about him is the Gem lodged in his belly button. He is often seen eating donuts or Fry Bits (i.e. leftover pieces of French fries that collect in the fryer), ordering pizza or making breakfast out of pancakes, syrup, whipped cream, popcorn and strawberries ("Together Breakfast"). He clearly does not have a healthy diet or cares about conforming to a bodily ideal.

As Mosher describes in his investigation of 'fat boys' in children's movies, overweight boys are usually relegated to supporting roles in ensemble casts (62). Following a storytelling tradition that equates outer appearance with inner character, obesity is taken as a sign for "behavioral deviance" and such vices as greed, corruption and laziness (61-62). The narrative structure in Western storytelling often likes to punish overweight boys for this perceived deviance, as well as falling short of masculine ideals, either shaming boys by associating them with femininity or outright killing them (Mosher 79). Steven is neither relegated to the sidelines, nor punished for his weight. He is neither lazy nor greedy or corrupt. He is, however, connected to femininity, but this is not done in an attempt to punish him. The show makes it clear that Steven's behavior is preferable to aggressive or violent forms of masculinity and never shames him for his femininity or his weight (more on Steven's femininity in section 5.4.) either

structurally through comedic framing or the explicit dialogue or the behavior of other characters. Steven himself is not ashamed or insecure either. He always lifts his shirt to look at the Gem on his belly and does not mind being stark naked in public ("Fry-bo").

Nevertheless, he does admire the male body ideal. After witnessing Amethyst turn into a buff version of Steven, he exclaims in awe that "it's all the me I could be" ("Coach Steven" [00:00:55-00:00:57]) and decides to work out. He does not want to have a well-defined torso for the sake of vanity, however. When Pearl questions him about it, he confesses that he wants to become strong so that he can be of more help to the team. The episode then makes it clear that real strength is strength of character, rather than physical strength. The fact that he admires buff male bodies is emphasized again when he imagines a day in the life of Garnet in the episode "Garnet's Universe". Steven invents several antagonists for her, one of which is a gigantic fox with a body reminiscent of the muscled heroes of the 80s. He clearly enjoys the spectacle that male bodies can provide. However, he does not approach the male body ideal from a place of shame but rather admiration and potential.

Despite his occasional admiration for hard bodies, though, Steven is not hindered by his weight. He is very active, always running around, mounting a bike or a scooter, and throwing himself into dangerous situations. He has lots of energy to burn. His weight never stops him from saving the day and is therefore not presented as a liability.

The hard, statuesque body ideal is further undermined by one particular aspect of Gem culture: fusing. Whereas male bodies are idealized as hard and impenetrable, female bodies are associated with fluidity and viscosity; they are always leaking and therefore undermine the fixed bodily boundaries of inside and outside (Grosz 194). When Gems fuse, they merge their bodies into one form. As part-Gem, Steven also shares this ability. In "Alone Together," the Gems try to teach Steven to fuse, but the person he eventually fuses with is Connie. Together they have a tall and lean female body, leaving the male attributes of Steven by the wayside ("Alone Together"). By fusing with female-bodied Gems, Steven is literally "being submerged into the horror of femininity" (Dyer 265) that sports like bodybuilding try to evade. The show does not frame this as a horrifying experience, however. Both Steven and Connie, or Stevon-

nie as they call themselves in their fused state, are shown to enjoy the experience very much, even on a physical level. They spend their time in a fused state running along the beach at dusk, eating donuts, and dancing with abandon at a rave ("Alone Together"). No comment is made about their lack of male genitals.

As has been discussed in section 3.2, hard bodies and heroic masculinity have long been entangled. But as has been shown here, one does not have to have a hard body to be a hero. In fact, being a hero does not necessarily involve physical fighting at all. The next section will look more closely at the heroic actions of Steven and his friends.

5.2. Heroic Masculinity

Being an action/fantasy/science fiction show, there is much space on *Steven Universe* for heroic action. Much of that action, however, is not performed by Steven alone. Physically demanding fights are generally the specialty of Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl. On occasion Steven is even joined by Connie. Additionally, Steven often needs saving himself or is not part of the action at all. Numerous episodes do no revolve around conflicts with Gem creatures or other foes at all, but simply deal with the normal life of a half-human half-alien boy.

When looking at the archetypal qualities of a hero as listed by Bilz (1), Steven embodies some of them, but not all. Being born to a human father and an alien mother gives him special magical abilities and Garnet even talks of destiny ("The Return"); he faces various enemies, mainly in the form of corrupted Gem creatures; he is helped by numerous allies; whereas he never has to prove his 'worth,' he does continuously face challenges that help him be a better person and a better Crystal Gem; there are warnings involved in his journey, but they usually revolve around parental admonishments of 'do not touch this' instead of prophecies regarding his journey; some of the Gem creatures or foes threaten the entire planet, so he does face death, even if the cartoon never makes it feel outright dire; the rewards he receives are often a pizza at the end of a mission, or an evening at the arcade with his friends and family. Sometimes it is knowledge, or another friend and ally.

What does not fit the character of Steven or the structure of the first season at all, is the hero's journey. He does not leave behind his known world, unless it is for brief

missions. The home base, however, remains the same. Rebecca Sugar was very adamant about keeping the character anchored in Beach City so that he would not lose touch with his humanity. Being excited about mundane everyday experiences is as important as being excited about the magical aspects of life, according to the creators (McDonnell 106). Even though he learns to gain more control over his powers and learns and grows in the course of the season, he does not return as a different man after his long transformative journey away from home.

Clearly, some of these criteria are only vaguely fulfilled, especially when it comes the first season of the show. Despite ample heroic actions, *Steven Universe* is not a classic hero's tale. Elements of it find their way into the narrative as they do in much of today's stories. Nonetheless, Steven and the Crystal Gems are framed as heroes, possibly heralding further generic shifts. Let us now investigate their heroism more closely.

Few of Steven's heroic moments happen during physical fights. That is not to say that Steven's escapades are not physically demanding, but there are not many actual *fights* he has to partake in. As will be addressed below, sometimes his anger or despair push him into being physically aggressive, but only when other avenues, such as mediating between opposing parties, have already been explored and remained ultimately unsuccessful. For example, when Amethyst and Garnet are smashed into a wall by a giant Gem creature in "Together Breakfast," Steven channels his emotions into physical strength and manages to push the creature into a lava pit, something the other Crystal Gems have been unable to do so. He does not often get injured either. In one memorable two-part episode, the antagonistic Gem Jasper knocks him out and leaves him with a black eye ("The Return", "Jail Break"). Another time he receives a tiny cut on his forehead by a falling rock ("Coach Steven"). During their fight with Lapis Lazuli's water creatures, everyone gets knocked around, including Steven, Connie and Greg, but none of them receive lasting injuries. Most of the physical fighting is done by Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl, whereas Steven's powers literally shield people from harm.

Outright heroic moments are not exactly numerous but do happen. When Connie is almost crushed by falling rocks, he tries to tackle her out of the way but ends up protecting them both with his shield bubble after stumbling and landing on top of her

("Bubble Buddies"). He also uses his shield bubble to save Lars when the teenager is thrown into the gaping maw of a Gem creature by Ronaldo. Steven jumps in after Lars and when the creature bites down on the bubble it gets destroyed ("Horror Club"). And sometimes, when Steven is heroic, he shares that moment with others. In "Lion 2: The Movie," a training bot follows Steven and Connie to Beach City where it shoots at them and causes a lot of damage to the street. Steven then pulls a pink sword that belonged to his mother out of Lion's head[4]. However, he does not know how to wield it by himself. Noticing his predicament, Connie grabs hold of the handles as well and together they defeat the bot with her tennis moves. Generally, though, Steven helps people in other ways, cheering them up when they are feeling down, throwing parties, cooking meals, being a friend.

What is more, Steven has the ability to come up with creative solutions in moments of crisis. That being said, he is often the cause of the problem himself, especially in the first half of season one. The above-mentioned monster that he ends up pushing into a lava pit only attacks them because it got free when Steven broke Garnet's concentration ("Together Breakfast"). He has a tendency to disregard or fail to listen to warnings given by the Gems and causes chaos when he inevitably touches something he should not have. In "Frybo," Pearl loses a Gem shard that develops a volatile and sinister consciousness when coming in contact with fabric. Steven finds the shard in his pants, decides to keep it in a sock and then uses it to make a mascot perform on its own so that his friend Peedee is not stuck doing the promotion work for his dad's restaurant. As a result, the mascot terrorizes customers by force-feeding fries to them. Steven manages to outsmart the creature by using more of the Gem shards on all of his clothes, which then attack the mascot until Steven can pull the shard out of it. Despite having caused the problem by not having listened to Pearl's admittedly complex lecture, he finds a clever solution to the problem that his guardian would not have considered.

This is somewhat of a trend. In "Serious Steven," he touches a floating artifact on a mission, which traps him and the Crystal Gems in a pyramid that seems at first to have no way out. Every room is lined with traps and only lead back to where they came from. Whereas Steven has to be saved by Garnet from several traps that he

[4] "Lion" is a magical pink lion that belonged to Steven's mother. He can, amongst other abilities, store items in his mane, which functions like a pocket dimension with seemingly infinite space.

accidentally activates by being clumsy or curious, he eventually realizes how to get out of the pyramid: All the rooms are constantly spinning and therefore always leading back to the first room. After that it is easy for Garnet to punch her way out of the problem. Steven remains an integral part of the team because of his ingenuity and specifically human perspective that the Gems themselves are lacking.

On many occasions, Steven is the one that has to be saved or does not participate in the fighting at all. Routinely, Steven finds himself in situations which he cannot master on his own: he almost falls off a cliff ("Cheeseburger Backpack"), gets eaten by a bird-like Gem creature ("Giant Woman"), falls out of the warp stream and nearly suffocates ("Warp Tour"), or antagonizes an opponent that almost ends up crushing him to death ("Marble Madness"). In such situations, it is usually Garnet, Amethyst or Pearl who rescue him. That said, saving the day is usually a group effort, and not a solo mission. Apart from outsmarting his opponents, Steven is very skilled at motivating others and to mediating between them:

> GARNET: Steven, I know you don't think we trust you. I know more often than not we treat you like a human child. But the truth is, we rely on you. Your voice inspires us, binds us, reminds us why we promised to protect the planet. You must now be that voice for [the people of the town].
>
> […]
>
> If anything happens, you need to be there to protect them. Like your mother once did. It's your destiny.
>
> ("The Return" [00:02:58-00:03:27])

Part of the reason for Garnet's speech is the fact that she wants to send Steven out of harm's way. If he leaves with the townsfolk, he is not present for an imminent attack perpetrated by Gems from their Homeworld. However, Garnet really does mean her words, as Steven has proven to be an inspiration to them numerous times. Steven is an unconventional hero because his control over his powers is spotty at best, he does not do most of the fighting and would rather stop people from fighting altogether whenever possible. Instead, it is his heart and creativity that make him a hero in the eyes of the other characters, and thus the audience.

Steven's personality and his powers will be further discussed on section 5.4., but I will first investigate the traces of traditional masculinity on *Steven Universe*.

5.3. Traditional Masculinity

After discussing the show's take on several aspects of traditional masculinity such as hard bodies and heroic masculinity, the analysis will now look at a few more traits: aggressive and violent masculinity, as well as the 'bully society' discussed by Jessie Klein (qtd. in Wooden and Gillam 58).

Central to the 'bully society' is the policing of gendered behavior. Boys are not supposed to display tender emotions, be interested in anything that can even remotely be considered feminine and are supposed to be tough, stoic, and athletic. As has already been discussed to some extent, and will be discussed even further down below, Steven does not adhere to any aspect of traditional ideal masculinity. He is very emotional and loving, adores the soft mane of his pink lion, likes to prepare meals for his family, and is anything but ripped, even if he is physically active. When faced with toxic masculinity such as Jasper's, Steven is appalled.

However, there are a few times when Steven himself displays aggressive masculinity. In the episode "Tiger Millionaire" he gets carried away while acting out his tough wrestling persona. When Lars asks for his autograph (without knowing that Tiger Millionaire is really Steven), Steven slaps his booklet to the ground, thereby humiliating him in front of the assembled crowd. Instantly Steven realizes that he has gone too far, but by then it is too late to do anything about it. Additionally, the show drives home how inappropriate his behavior was by having the emcee Mr. Smiley call Steven "the *cruelest* creature on the planet" (emphasis added by the original voice acting, "Tiger Millionaire" [00:06:34-00:06:36]). Steven is simply crushed.

Sometimes, when his emotions get too much and he is either desperate or angry during a crisis, Steven turns to violence to solve his problems. For example, in "Arcade Mania," Steven's despair turns into rage when he cannot free Garnet from the influence of an arcade game by talking to her, defeating her in multiplayer mode, or even by pulling the plug. He does not see any other way out and destroys the machine by ripping part of the console off and smashing it into the screen. However, violence is only ever used by him as the very last resort.

In "Steven and the Stevens", Steven gets his hands on a timepiece that lets him travel through time. When his dad is unable to be in his band for the annual Beach-A-Palooza, he fills the open spots with several Stevens, courtesy of time travel. It does

not take long, however, before the original Steven becomes a little tyrant and tries to dictate what kind of music they are playing and what personality trait each of the Stevens should be known for, dividing them into Smart Steven, Funny Steven, Sensitive Steven and calling himself Handsome Steven. After some time, Steven acknowledges that he is even annoying himself. When the other Stevens try to throw original Steven out of the band, things escalate and eventually a whole crowd of Stevens turns up at the point in the past where Steven picked up the timepiece for the first time and start physically fighting each other. In the end, Steven crushes the timepiece in order to end the madness. Scenes like these, where Steven either gets carried away or becomes arrogant and over-confident, are far and few between. But they show that he is human, and above all, a child. Additionally, the show frames moments such as Steven humiliating Lars or bossing around other Stevens as negative and a learning opportunity to do better. Steven tends to realize quickly where he went wrong and tries to fix it one way or another. Violence or toxic behaviors never remain unaddressed.

For the most part, Steven is secure in his nurturing side and never gets put down for it, not even by the cool kids in town. However, there is one character in particular who lives according to the rules of the 'bully society': Lars.

Laramie "Lars" Barriga is one of two teenagers working at the local donut shop Big Donut and always acts annoyed when Steven comes into the shop to buy something (which he often does). He is mostly concerned with hot "summer babes" ("The Mirror Gem: Part 1" [00:03:10-00:03:10]) and hanging out with the cool kids ("Lars and the Cool Kids"). He is focused on coming across as cool and tries to perform a tough, stoic kind of masculinity that he continuously keeps falling short of. For example, when he spots the cool crowd in town, he is afraid that being seen with Steven will ruin his chances. Defying convention, it is Steven who gets the cool kids to hang out with them because they appreciate his honest and caring personality. Other than Lars, Steven has no social inhibitions and knowledge of cliques.

When they do hang out, Lars always manages to say the wrong thing by trying to be tough and cool and pretend he likes what the others do instead of unabashedly being himself like Steven always is. For example, he says that wearing seatbelts is lame upon which Sour Cream, one of the cool teenagers, tells him that "there's nothing

lame about seatbelt safety" ("Lars and the Cool Kids" [00:04:50-00:04:53]). When Buck mentions that the snake on Lars' T-shirt looks "nasty," Lars agrees with him and says that he hates snakes. Buck replies that it is "too bad. Some snakes are pretty cool" ([00:04:36-00:04:43]). Additionally, Lars does not want them to know that he works at the Big Donut because the others think it is lame and furthermore lies about his prowess at arcade games to gain their approval. Lars is clearly concerned with putting up a tough front and cannot allow himself to show vulnerabilities in front of other people, even if those vulnerabilities have to do with his likes and dislikes. Showing a genuine interest in something invites criticism and ridicule, and Lars pretends he is above all that.

This is additionally emphasized in "Horror Club," in which he spontaneously joins Steven, as well as his coworker and romantic interest Sadie as they attend a horror movie night at Ronaldo Fryman's place, who is the local conspiracy theorist. Lars promptly insults Ronaldo's costume and thinks the movie selection is lame. When the place turns out to be haunted, Ronaldo blames the inner emotional turmoil of Lars and tries to sacrifice him to the Gem creature in the basement. The creature shows them a past memory which reveals that Lars and Ronaldo used to be friends. When young Ronaldo wanted to show a photo of Lars being hit in the face by the haunted house to everyone as proof of the paranormal, Lars was so afraid of being humiliated that he tore the photo apart, which effectively ended their friendship. Not only can he not enjoy or be passionate about anything in front of others, he also has to punish others for doing so when he cannot.

In "Coach Steven," Lars even tells Steven that he needs to toughen up after witnessing him being dramatic over a little cut:

> LARS: Toughen up, Steven.
> STEVEN: You're right, I'm too soft.
> LARS: If I weren't so modest, I'd whip out my sweet six-pack and show you what a real man looks like.
> ("Coach Steven" [00:03:49-00:03:52])

While bragging about his masculinity here, he tries with all his might to open a jar but is unable to do so and hands it to Sadie who opens it for him. The show therefore always undermines Lars' faked confidence and toughness. Overall, however, the show does not condemn Lars for his attempts at portraying a tough front. He is still a person worth knowing and Steven even calls him his best friend ("Bubble Buddies").

When Lars is trapped on an island with Sadie and Steven he even lets go of his image and starts showing his emotional side, crying because he feels homesick and kissing Sadie after a heart-to-heart ("Island Adventure"). So, while Lars is very concerned with being seen as tough and unemotional, he is clearly not a one-dimensional character.

The characters who represent hypermasculine aggression and violence the most are the fusion of Garnet and Amethyst, Sugilite, and their foe Jasper. Sugilite is a gigantic Gem with four arms and a volatile temper. She loves to destroy buildings and structures in "Coach Steven" and even attacks the beach where Steven, Greg, Lars and Sadie are working out simply because she is bored. Sugilite's volatility is the reason why Amethyst and Garnet rarely fuse. Pearl and Steven end up having to stop them because the power went to their head. Thus, unchecked power and the violent expression thereof is framed as negative as well.

The other hypermasculine character is a soldier from the Gem Homeworld, Jasper. Her masculine-sounding name is already telling. She arrives on Earth with Peridot (another Gem from the Homeworld), when the latter wants to stop the Crystal Gems from breaking her machines that are supposed to restore the invasion efforts of the planet. When Jasper sees the Crystal Gems, she is not impressed and asks if they had seen Rose Quartz, who is the only one worth fighting in her opinion:

> JASPER: Neither of you saw Rose Quartz? What a shame. I hoped to meet her. I was looking forward to beating her into the ground.
> ("The Return" [00:08:18-00:08:26]).

After making her violent urges clear, she proceeds to belittle each one of the Crystal Gems in turn. She then destabilizes Garnet who turns back into two inactive gemstones and when she sees Steven's shield that used to belong to Rose Quartz, she knocks him out and imprisons them all on Peridot's ship. Violent warrior-masculinity is clearly being performed here, despite Jasper's female waistline.

Another mark of toxic masculinity is Jasper's explicit dislike of Gems fusing with each other. She calls Garnet's fused form a "shameless display" ("The Return" [00:08:34-00:08:35]) and thinks "fusion is just a cheap tactic to make weak Gems stronger" ("Jail Break" [00:05:17-00:05:20]). In that she echoes toxic masculinity and hypermasculine displays of bodybuilders that create hard boundaries and angles to distinguish themselves from female fluidity. Fusion is the literal merging of two bodies and

only to be done in dire circumstances. In “Jail Break,” Jasper ends up pressuring Lapis Lazuli into fusing with her when the Crystal Gems prove to be too difficult to defeat on her own, but Lapis drags their fused body into the ocean with her water power, trapping them both there. Aggression, violence, a disregard of feminine powers such as fusion, a lack of compassion—all these are markers of toxic masculinity. Jasper does not receive any pity or kindness from the Crystal Gems during the two episodes in season one that she appears in, not even from Steven. Masculinity unbalanced with femininity, such as the kind that Lars portrays (Tishma) is clearly easier to forgive and tolerate than Jasper’s physical violence and blatant disregard for others. The show makes it clear that toxic masculinity is not something to be emulated.

The next section will turn away from traditional masculinity and deal with the feminine traits embodied by Steven, such as his power set, his tendency to keep the peace, and his nurturing of others.

5.4. Feminine Themes

Up until now the analysis has focused on traditionally masculine themes and how they are expressed, framed or transformed in *Steven Universe*. This section will now investigate the feminine themes embodied by the character Steven. As mentioned above, his gendered behavior is a balance between masculine and feminine traits. He is both active and passive, clever and emotional, charges headfirst into danger as well as “[keeps] the harmony” (“Giant Woman” [00:02:53-00:02:54]). But his masculine characteristics almost take a backseat at times. Above all, he is a loving and caring boy, who tries to keep his friends and family together by mediating between warring parties and supporting them at every turn. Moreover, he possesses an emotional intelligence and empathy that surpasses that of any other character.

The first part of this section will focus on the aspects related to Steven’s personality as stated here, whereas the second part will take a closer look at Steven’s magical powers that also carry feminine connotations.

5.4.1. The Power of Love

Steven is a very sensitive and emotional person on top of being active and heroic. He sheds many tears, both happy and sad, throughout the series, even for trivial things such as the fact that snakes do not have arms ("An Indirect Kiss"). He also likes and enjoys things supposedly girly like the very soft mane of the pink lion that becomes his companion ("Steven's Lion"), as well as "schmaltzy" romantic endings of books ("Open Book" [00:10:18-00:10:19]). Additionally, he is often scared of the dangers he encounters, but that fear is never framed as negative or a sign of cowardice. Instead it is a healthy and normal reaction to danger. His father explicitly teaches him that it is okay to abort or retreat if a situation becomes too much ("Space Race"). This is a stark contrast to genre-typical coming of age narratives, in which boys and young men have to suppress and control their fear in order to be accepted as heroes (McIntosh, "Emotional Expression").

Aside from being very emotional, Steven is also very good at expressing his feelings. In "House Guest," Greg pretends that his leg is broken in order to spend more time with his son. His lie leads Steven to believe that his powers—the unreliability of which is a red thread through the season—do not work properly. Once Steven realizes what Greg has done, he is quickly able to identify and express what bothers him so much about it:

> STEVEN: The Gems needed me to fix the broken rock, but my healing powers aren't working. It-it's because of you, you messed with my head!
> […]
> I really thought I was getting better, I finally felt like a Crystal Gem. Now, what if I can't do…*anything*?
> (emphasis added by the original voice acting, "House Guest" [00:08:10-00:08:28]).

Steven then stomps out but as soon as he sees his dad's guitar next to his ukulele on the porch, he goes back in to apologize for yelling. He does not like when people are fighting or being involved in fights himself. Another example of this is the episode "Fusion Cuisine," in which Connie's parents want to have dinner with the Universes to get to know the people their daughter is spending so much time with, Steven, Greg and the Gems have to pretend to be a normal nuclear family because Connie told her parents that the Universes were just that. During the disastrous dinner, Connie takes Steven aside and demands to know why he could not have brought just *one* of the Gems to which Steven replies that she is just ashamed of him. They stop arguing but

the matter remains unresolved until after dinner when the two of them have a heart-to-heart and apologize. He clearly is very in tune with his emotion and those of others and knows how to express them. In “An Indirect Kiss,” Amethyst’s Gem is cracked, and the Crystal Gems try to teach Steven to access the healing powers that he inherited from his mother. When nothing seems to work, Garnet and Pearl go off to find a different solution to the problem and Steven talks to a statue of his mother about the problem:

> STEVEN: I don’t know how to feel about you, but everyone else does. I wish I could have met you, then this place would make me sad, and I could cry healing tears, like you.
> (“An Indirect Kiss” [00:07:07-00:07:19])

Even when Steven is confused about his feelings, does he know how to pinpoint the issue and express said confusion. Whereas traditional masculinity eschews emotions and makes it hard for men to express them in healthy and productive ways, *Steven Universe* favors a boy hero that not only has a rich emotional life but also knows how to put it into words and openly discussed positive and negative feelings with others. Being so in tune with his emotions is very helpful in his quest to mediate between people.

As mentioned above, one of Steven’s strengths lies in maintaining harmony. He hates it when people are fighting and always tries to stop them. This does not mean that it always works, however. Sometimes when Amethyst and Pearl are bickering or outright fighting during a mission, Steven’s words have no impact. In “Giant Woman,” it is only when he gets eaten by a bird-like Gem that Amethyst and Pearl manage to overcome their differences and work together to save Steven and complete the mission. But even when it does not work, Steven always prefers words over violence. During their fight with Lapis Lazuli in “Ocean Gem: Part 2,” Steven decides at one point that he has had enough of the fighting when the Crystal Gems, Connie and Greg keep getting roughed up and manages to talk Lapis around.

Simply asking people to stop fighting is not always enough; Steven also has to physically insert himself between the warring parties as well as deliver spontaneous speeches, which he is quite good at. In “Tiger Millionaire,” Garnet and Pearl do not approve of Amethyst being part of the underground wrestling tournament and using her Gem powers on humans. Amethyst, however, needs the wrestling as an outlet for her pent-up anger and frustration. She often feels misunderstood and not good

enough in comparison to the other Crystal Gems. A physical fight ensues, and Steven manages to talk Garnet and Pearl around by telling them about Amethyst's feelings ("Tiger Millionaire"). Steven does not like it when his friends argue, but he likes it less if they are physically fighting. He hates it even more when the entire town tries to gang up against the mayor of Beach City and effectively stops a riot from breaking out: Mayor Dewey lies to the town about having a power outage fixed by the end of the day. When he stands before them and explains that he is not actually certain how long the outage will last, the townsfolk first throw his campaign buttons and other objects at him and then proceed to topple his van. Steven stops them before it can get even further out of hand:

> STEVEN: Everyone, please! The power might not be back on tonight. It might not be back on for even a year! But I know that you're all going to be okay because I know each and every one of you. You're smart, and you're tough, and you're resourceful. And you all care about each other more than you care about microwave dinners or video games or being able to see in the dark. I know it'll hurt your businesses; I know it'll hurt your lives. But are we really going to hurt each other? Of course not! We'll face the night together and we'll survive because we are the light of Beach City!
> ("Political Power" [00:08:33-00:09:21])

Even if his words often fall on the cheesy side, they inspire others and get them to see reason. It helps that he genuinely cares about other people and wants them to be happy.

Steven is a very supportive person and always tries to help others. Sometimes it is everyday kindnesses, such as bringing donuts to Lars with Sadie when they think he is sick ("Joking Victim") or making and then handing out flyers for his dad when Greg wants to give guitar lessons ("Shirt Club"). Sometimes it is a little more involved, like safekeeping a lost bracelet for a stranger he might never see again ("Bubble Buddies"), gifting a treasured toy to Onion when he realizes that the other boy is bored and lonely because his dad leaves him alone all day every day ("Onion Trade"), or dragging Sadie and Lars on vacation to repair their friendship ("Island Adventure"). In "Alone Together," Connie confesses that she does not like to dance because she is afraid people will stare at her. In order to encourage her to try, Steven puts a hand over his eyes and then asks her to dance with him on the beach where no one will see. They end up fusing together and Connie learns to get over her fear in the pro-

cess (“Alone Together”). It is very important to Steven that everyone is happy. He does not just support others; he actively tries to take care of them.

Steven’s nurturing side can be seen throughout the entire season. He makes breakfast for the Gems and himself so they can spend time together “like best buds” (“Together Breakfast” [00:02:07-00:02:08) and when Greg’s leg is supposedly broken, takes care of him, cooking and entertaining him throughout the day (“House Guest”). He throws a beach party for the Gems and the Pizzas in “Beach Party” because he thinks he can help them develop an amicable relationship after the Gems accidentally destroy the roof of the Pizza’s restaurant (“Beach Party”), and when he learns that the Gems have never celebrated their birthdays he throws each of them a party to show them how much joy a birthday party can bring (“So Many Birthdays”). In addition to food and celebrations, Steven also seems to love babies. When Pearl’s physical form is destroyed in “Steven the Sword Fighter,” she turns back into her gemstone form in order to regenerate. While Garnet and Amethysts are not worried, Steven holds constant vigil and treats the gemstone like an egg that has to be hatched, keeping it in a warm nest underneath a lamp. Moreover, when he inadvertently creates a field of sentient melons that are shaped somewhat like humanoid babies, Steven is delighted: “This [melon is] just a baby. Aw, look at him. So precious” (“Watermelon Steven” [00:03:14-00:03:21]). He later even carries one of the baby melons in his overalls in lieu of a baby belt. This, together with his desire to make and share meals, as well as spoiling his friends and family, clearly points to his nurturing side. What emphasizes it even more is the fact that none of the other characters share his enthusiasm for taking care of other people. This enthusiastic nurturance also informs his Gem powers, which carry connotations of femininity and will be discussed in the second part of this section.

5.4.2. Steven’s Gem Powers

Being part Gem, Steven has many magical abilities which only continue to expand as the show progresses. Many of his abilities are very gendered in nature and have traditionally been assigned to female characters. Instead of having offensive weapons such as Amethyst’s whip, Pearl’s staff and sword, or Garnet’s enhanced fists, his main ‘weapon’ is a shield. In season one we see two variations of his shield: a pink

bubble that envelopes him and those he wishes to protect, and a traditionally-shaped pink shield that repels offensive attacks. Despite its defensive nature, Steven embraces his ability with enthusiasm. What is more, when he first gains access to his mother's sword, he is unable to yield it. Only with Connie's help is he able to use it to defeat a training bot in "Lion 2: The Movie," thus sharing this potentially phallic power with her. Moreover, in "Open Book" it is Connie who gains access to a sword in the first place, defending Steven against a seemingly antagonistic copy of herself. He does not seem to gravitate towards offensive abilities.

Other powers include the above-discussed ability to fuse with others, as well as animating plants and having limited control over them, shapeshifting, and a certain superhuman strength and durability that emerges in dire situations. In later seasons, Steven gains access to additional abilities such as resurrecting living beings with his tears. In season one, however, his healing powers are more limited, as he has only begun to learn about his magical heritage. In "An Indirect Kiss," he accidentally heals Connie's eyesight by sharing a juice box with her, excitedly concluding that he possesses healing spit. In the video essay "The Subversive Boyhood of Steven Universe," Jonathan McIntosh concludes that Steven essentially "possesses healing kisses—healing affection" ([00:03:00-00:03:06]), supporting his statement by clips of Steven healing his teddy bear with a kiss. It certainly emphasizes Steven's caring and nurturing character. However, in season one, that 'healing affection' is undermined by Steven's boyish joy in licking his hands and planting it on broken legs and gemstones alike ("House Guest", "Ocean Gem: Part 2"). Nevertheless, healing abilities are unusual for male heroes. In the fantasy genre, healing as well as shielding are "both considered to be secondary or support skills" (McIntosh, "Subversive Boyhood" [00:03:30-00:03:33]) and carried out by women from the fringes of the battlefield so that male warriors can continue to fight unimpeded. Consider also our own culture in which men go to war predominantly as soldiers and women as nurses.

Apart from healing and shielding, Steven also possesses an additional subversive power, namely a level of empathy that goes beyond a normal human capacity. This ability will become more pronounced in later seasons as well, but there are already hints of it in season one. When the arm of a Gem creature falls off in "Arcade Mania," Steven touches his own arm and makes a sympathetic face. By itself, this scene

could be taken to simply highlight Steven's caring side. Consider however another instance taking place in "Horror Club," in which Ronaldo's lighthouse is haunted. Steven places his hand flat against the wall and tells the others that he "can feel it. It's hurting…and obsessed" ([00:06:43-00:06:47]). As McIntosh points out, empathy is "still stereotypically associated with women" ("Subversive Boyhood" [00:06:22-00:06:25]) and therefore rarely a trait given to boys, especially in masculine genres such as fantasy or action. Most of Steven's powers, then, have traditionally been regarded as feminine. As mentioned above however, this is not framed in a negative light. He is not made to be ashamed of his powers, they are not seen as a hurdle he has to overcome on his journey to traditional manhood. These powers simply are a valued part of Steven and exactly what makes him a hero.

The final aspect to be analyzed is Steven's relationship with his guardians.

5.5. Steven's Guardians

Steven has not just his father Greg as a caretaker, but also Garnet, Amethyst and Pearl. Each one of them fulfills different emotional roles; whereas Pearl is somewhat of a helicopter mom, overly worried that Steven might hurt himself, Amethyst is more like a big sister who loves to break rules for him and with him, teases him constantly and gets him in trouble with the other Gems. Greg offers a continued connection to humanity and teaches Steven about emotional vulnerability, whereas Garnet is more of a distant role model Steven can and does look up to. However, much like other narratives for children, *Steven Universe* also portrays familial neglect.

Steven lives in a house that is built in front of the temple in which the Gems live. The temple can only be accessed with their gemstones and until Steven learns to control his Gem powers, he is generally not allowed entrance. Presumably because it is too dangerous. Steven occasionally gains access to his mother's room but is discouraged from entering the space. That includes spending time with the other Gems when they are in their rooms during their downtime from missions. As the season progresses Steven is sometimes seen spending time with Amethyst in her room, which then often results in chaos or new magical discoveries.

The fact that Steven is not encouraged or even forbidden from entering the temple leads to the circumstance that he is technically and often practically living alone in the

house. At times he spends entire days or nights by himself when the other Gems are out protecting the Earth from Gem creatures. Whereas Pearl tends to his laundry and keeps the house in order, Steven is shown to cook for himself, because the Gems do not require food.

Steven often tries to get the Gems to spend more time with him, but he is not always successful because their duty to the planet comes first. The situation gets better once Steven starts to regularly join them on missions, but the occasional neglect still happens. They love him and openly express their feelings for him, but they are not always present.

Steven's father Greg lives in a van outside his car wash. They generally spend quite some time together, bonding over their shared love for music or simply shooting the breeze. They are very open in regard to their affection for one another and have a healthy, loving relationship. For the most part.

As mentioned above, in "House Guest" Greg pretends that Steven's magic failed to heal his broken leg so that he can spend more time with his son. He is invited to live at the house until his leg is healed and we are shown a montage of the time they spend together. When there is a sudden emergency and Steven has to go on a mission with the Gems, Greg is reluctant to let him go.

> GREG: Don't worry about your old man. My leg's not getting any more broken. If I need something, I'll just...crawl. My arms are still…not broken.
> ("House Guest" [00:04:07-00:04:17])

Apart from the lie that his leg is broken he is now also emotionally manipulating his son to stay with him. In order to make Greg comfortable and to ensure that he will receive help in case of emergencies, Pearl hands him a warp whistle that will activate the warp pad and let them know that he needs something. However, Greg does not use the whistle responsibly. Once he simply uses it to make sure it actually works, which is unnecessary given that his leg is not actually broken. Then he keeps using it for minor inconveniences like not being able to find the remote or when Steven is missing a funny commercial. The result of Greg's lie is that Steven is suddenly no longer able to use his healing power because he started doubting himself. When Steven realizes that Greg is faking his injury, he confronts him about it and makes Greg realizes where he went wrong. In order to fix what he broke, Greg helps Steven save the day. All is well that ends well. Moreover, now that Greg has experienced so

vividly that his actions have consequences, he does not try to manipulate Steven again. Even if his attempt was misguided and hurtful, Greg loves his son dearly and just wants him to be happy and safe.

Another dynamic to their relationship is the fact that Greg is explicitly uncomfortable with the magical side of Steven's life, especially when it comes to his shapeshifting abilities ("Cat Fingers"). Additionally, the Gems do not seem to like him very much, and vice versa. These are all reasons why Greg seems to keep his distance from the temple. However, in the course of the first season, he realizes more and more that his son not only needs him, but that Greg also wants to protect him. In "Space Race," Pearl gets carried away by the thought of traveling to space and visiting other planets once more. She is excited to share this particular part of Gem culture with Steven, but when Greg realizes that she is seriously planning on taking his son to space with her, he puts his foot down:

> GREG: You are not taking him to space!
> PEARL: Yes, I am.
> GREG: No. I'm not allowing it!
> ("Space Race" [00:06:51-00:06:56])

This is a very assertive statement from Greg who is usually much more mellow and lets Steven do whatever he wants. Usually, it is Steven who is more serious about parenting, for example insisting that he is not allowed to watch television because he is grounded even though Greg does not remember grounding him in the first place ("Maximum Capacity").

The scene in "Space Race" is not the only instance in which Greg becomes more interested in parenting his son. When he starts to realize how dangerous the life of a Crystal Gem really is, he expresses his discomfort with Steven's inclusion. In "Ocean Gem: Part 2," Greg witnesses a fight between the Gems and Lapis Lazuli, the latter of which ends up nearly drowning both Connie and Steven. Greg is not happy.

> GREG: Is this a normal magical mission for you? 'Cause I'm not sure how comfortable I am with you going on these anymore!
> ("Ocean Gem: Part 2" [00:06:17-00:06:22])

He is clearly worried about his son and in a later episode even tries to talk to him about it. Steven tells him about the robots that Peridot has been sending to Earth, and Greg clumsily tries to get him to talk about being a Crystal Gem:

> GREG: That sounds scary. You know, I'm not sure if…Do you ever feel like this Gem stuff is too much for you?

("The Return" [00:00:53-00:00:59])

Before Steven can finish asking what his father means by that, they are interrupted by the arrival of Peridot's spaceship. Nothing more is said about it, but when Steven is desperate to help the Gems later in the episodes, Greg understands and lets him go.

Parenting on *Steven Universe* is a complex issue. Both the Gems as well as Greg clearly love and care for Steven, want to spend time with him and protect him from harm. At the same time, however, the Gems also repeatedly neglect him whenever they are not on a mission and Greg does not even live with his son. Similar to many narratives for children featuring a child hero, Steven is often needed to save the day when the adults in his life are failing. Bot other than *Gravity Falls*, for example, Steven is not left to do so with only other children by his side but is supported and actively taught by his guardians to deal with the supernatural elements of their lives.

5.6. Summary

Steven Universe breaks with many genre-typical gender conventions. It has a variety of well-rounded and complex female and genderqueer characters that are firmly part of the action, breaking with the tradition of adding a single female character to a group of male heroes, soldiers, and warriors. The boy hero at the center of the narrative defies the traditional ideal hero with his soft round body, his seemingly endless capacity for empathy and compassion, his feminine powers of healing and shielding, as well as his nurturing side and his tendency to deescalate and resolve fights. At the same time, Steven is an active boy throwing himself into danger to protect his loved ones, just like other boy heroes in fantasy and action genres. His male and feminine sides exist in a balance that is unusual for such television fare.

During the rare instances in which the first season of the show does refer to toxic masculine behavior, such as Jasper's violent warrior demeanor, it is not as something worthy of emulation. A majority of the male characters openly express their emotions to one another and thereby disrupt the stoic image of Western heroes that only lose control over their emotions in the face of tragedy (McIntosh, "Emotional Expression"). Steven is never told that he is too emotional and that in order to be a hero he has to also become a real man. On the contrary, boys on *Steven Universe* do cry, and they cry often and without shame.

6. Conclusion

The underlying question of this thesis has been whether contemporary US-American cartoons reiterate, undermine, or challenge traditional notions of masculinity and boyhood such as ‘boys don’t cry’ or ‘boys will be boys.’ A detailed analysis of two specific cartoons, *Gravity Falls* and *Steven Universe*, has been conducted to answer these questions. As shown, these shows could not be more different in their treatment of the subject matter at hand.

To recap, traditional or toxic masculinity is characterized by misogyny, homophobia, and racism. Men are engaged in intense competition with each other, lack empathy and compassion and show an inability or unwillingness to nurture others. Expression of tender emotions or admissions of fear are seen as signs of weakness and personal failure. Moreover, toxic masculinity has a high propensity for aggression and violence (Kupers 717). Action, adventure, fantasy, and science fiction genres have a long tradition of celebrating male heroes that show deference to this notion of traditional masculinity. Whereas the classic hero formula has been transformed in the past decades to include women, people of color, various partnerships and ensemble casts (Mallan 152), traditional masculinity often still finds expression in these masculine genres.

Gravity Falls, too, often evokes imagery of ideal masculine bodies and toxic behavior. However, the show’s treatment of toxic masculinity is far from straightforward. Take the hard, muscled body ideal, for example. At the same time as extreme versions of the muscled body are ridiculed, so are bodies who do not conform to the ideal.

Dipper is continuously called a wimp or compared to a girl, which is a hallmark of the ‘bully society’ (qtd. in Wooden and Gillam xxxii). He is told to toughen up, to control his emotions, in order words, to act like a real man. Men and boys who do not conform to the masculine ideal, who have feminine interests or traits, are mercilessly ridiculed.

Thus, *Gravity Falls* creates a fine line that Dipper has to toe, a balance between too masculine and not masculine enough, which he constantly fails to keep. Moreover, the show often maneuvers Dipper into a position where he has to sacrifice his dignity, which is the very thing he needs in order to survive the ‘bully society.’ Dipper himself

is entrenched in this toxic environment of ‘boys will be boys’ and does not hesitate to join in on the bullying when it means the acceptance of his peers (“Love God”).

It is not just his peers who police and punish him for falling short of the ideal. Adults are no source of comfort or protection for Dipper either. Even though Dipper and Steven Universe are the same age, the former behaves much older and more cynical, echoing a tradition that treats children like small adults and teaches boys that they have to act like real men. Dipper is the savvy, cynical media consumer neglected by the adults that should be taking care of him that has peppered the media landscape since the late 1980s (Kincheloe 126). He can take care of himself because he has had to learn how to do that, and often has to rescue and protect the adults around him with only his twin sister by his side. Taken together, these notions paint a very traditional image of masculinity.

An argument could be made that the extensive use of parody on *Gravity Falls* is a form of subversion that undermines traditional masculinity. Gender, but especially masculinity, is made visible here and becomes part of the explicit cultural conversation and negotiation. Many narratives in contemporary media productions operate according to masculine gender norms without questioning or pointing a spotlight on them. In the end, however, the cartoon fails to call into question all but the most extreme performances of toxic masculinity—the hypermasculine spectacle of the bodybuilding manotaurs (“Manliness”) and pathological Type A personalities like that of Mr. Pool Check (“Deep End”). Even Stan’s sleazy brand of misogyny is accepted and even endorsed (“Boss Mabel”). Parody may shine a spotlight on masculinity here, but the disruption does not last long and eventually is smoothed out by the return of the norm (Wooden and Gillam 34): boys will be boys and are not allowed to cry.

Steven Universe, on the other hand, openly challenges and subverts traditional gender roles. On the show, there is no space for misogyny, homophobia or racism among the various characters of color, complex female or genderqueer characters and depiction of LGBT relationships such as Ruby and Sapphire’s (“Jail Break”). Competition between male characters always remains playful, as when Steven and Greg challenge each other to a spitting contest with watermelon seeds (“Watermelon Steven”). Aggression or violence are only ever a last resort for Steven, if not for the Crystal Gems who are used to and comfortable with fighting. He always tries to me-

diate between parties, to deescalate conflicts and talk people down from behaving violently. Only when all else has failed does he resort to aggressive behavior. Even so, aggressive displays are emotional outburst born of desperation rather than calculation or conviction.

Steven's powers are a straightforward challenge to toxic masculinity as well. Instead of an offensive weapon, he was gifted with shielding powers and bodily fluids that heal and resurrect others. Moreover, he has a supernatural capacity for empathy that clearly informs his overt nurturing behavior.

Whereas genre-typical male characters rarely express their emotions openly, the male characters on *Steven Universe* never seem to stop doing so. On this show "characters don't mask their affection for each other behind cynicism or teasing or self-deprecating humor" (McIntosh, "Emotional Expression" [00:07:20-00:07:28]). Admitting to emotions such as fear or love or sadness is perfectly normal on *Steven Universe*, which cannot be said for *Gravity Falls* where hugs have to be disguised as chokeholds ("Dreamscaperers"). Steven especially is a very emotional boy who sheds many tears throughout the entire show and is never made to feel ashamed or ridiculed for it.

Even though his friend Lars sometimes tries to bully him, it is not an expression of systematic policing—Steven does not live in a 'bully society.' He is cherished and admired for his kindness and compassion. He has loving relationships with the adults around him who treat him more like an innocent child to be protected rather than a small adult or a "beast of the field" (Calvert 70). Even though his guardians follow the trend of neglecting their charge like many parents and authority figures in children's media, they clearly love Steven and want him to be happy and protected.

Steven also falls short of the ideal masculine body image. His overweight body is round and soft, and he loves to eat. His body shows no statuesque definitions or hard contours. His weight, however, is never portrayed as a weakness. He is just as capable of saving the day as the more buff Gems. Furthermore, he is just as active as other boy heroes and loves to run, jump, or bike in his free time. In the absence of the 'bully society,' athleticism is not the only acceptable value of young masculinity.

One of the show's messages is that healthy gendered expression is a balance between masculine and feminine traits (Tishma), showing characters who veer too

much into traditionally masculine behavior as undesirable, if not irredeemable. Gender, then, is a very carefully designed aspect of *Steven Universe*, and consciously made to subvert traditional masculinity. But other than *Gravity Falls*, it does not open the conversation by mocking gendered behavior, not even toxic behavior. It rather encourages diverse gendered expression and shows how compassion and empathy are aspects worthy of even male heroes.

As different as these two cartoons are, they have one thing in common: the portrayal of masculinity occupies center stage, even if only *Steven Universe* could be called subversive. It is, however, not enough to analyze only two cartoons if one wants to pick up on wider trends. Without going into great detail, it would be useful at this point to cast a somewhat wider net and consider other cartoons of adventure, action or fantasy genres such as *Over the Garden Wall* or *Adventure Time*.

Over the Garden Wall is a dark fantasy/adventure miniseries produced by Patrick McHale for Cartoon Network in 2014. In it, the two half-brothers Wirt and Greg are trapped between life and death, wandering through the Great Unknown and trying to get back home. For a fantasy/adventure narrative, Wirt is an unconventional protagonist reminiscent at times of Dipper Pines. Wirt is always worried and scared; he tends to overthink every decision he is about to make and echoes the cynicism that Kincheloe detects in children from the late 80s onward (126). He is, however, more dramatic than Dipper and likes to monologue to himself, lamenting the trials and tribulations of his lot in life. Wirt's younger half-brother Greg, on the other hand, is irrational and naïve, with no self-preservation instinct to speak of. Greg keeps stumbling into dangerous situations which causes Wirt to stop thinking and start acting. In direct contrast to Dipper, and to many protagonists of the genre, Wirt has no interest in heroics and would rather not have anything to do with adventuring at all. He is interested in poetry and the clarinet but keeps his interests to himself in fear of being ridiculed.

The expectations of traditional masculinity have left their mark on Wirt. He falls short of the ideal because he is neither athletic nor heroic, or even very decisive and the generator of action. Wirt needs to be forced to overcome his passivity even in dire situations. Such a portrayal of masculinity could therefore be regarded as a critique of non-heroic male behavior because Wirt's passivity often engenders the reaction that

he should act differently if only to protect his little brother. He is responsible for them both and should act accordingly.

The masculinity depicted in *Over the Garden Wall* points towards a trend already mentioned by Mallan (152): contemporary heroes tend to have more brains than brawn. In this case, however, it is less cleverness and more a sensitive and artistic personality that is at the center of the show. Other than *Steven Universe*, however, Wirt's inability to act is almost portrayed in pathological terms and reinforces rather than undermines traditional gender conventions.

The popular animated show *Adventure Time*, on the other hand, deals differently with binary gender norms. It was created by Pendleton Ward for Cartoon Network and originally released between 2010 and 2018 in ten seasons. The show centers around the very last human, a 12-year-old boy named Finn, and his best friend and adoptive brother Jake, who is a yellow dog with shapeshifting abilities. They live in the post-apocalyptic 'Land of Ooo' among magical beings of all shapes and sizes and regular-ly go on adventures together.

Adventure Time has a decidedly queer subtext and portrays both gender, as well as identity as fluid rather than static. Numerous characters are shown to break with the binary concept of gender and rather subscribe to multiple genders or remain indeter-minately gendered (Jane 235). Other than *Steven Universe* in which the sexless and nonbinary Gems still present themselves as predominately female, the characters on *Adventure Time* subvert the normative gender binary more overtly: princesses have lumpy purple bodies and male voices, computers identify with both genders, and supposedly male penguins produce eggs (238-239).

Finn's boyhood is much more conventionally masculine than Dipper's or Steven's. More often than not, there is enthusiastic physical violence involved in his adven-tures, and his righteous and chivalrous heroism is reminiscent of televised knight-hood. On the other hand, princesses save him as much as he saves them and ele-ments of nurturing and frailty are just as much part of his personality as his enthusi-asm for swords and physically demanding adventures (237-238). His friend Jake shows nontraditional traits as well, such as his love of parenting, cooking and cross-dressing (238). Whereas the show seems to portray traditional masculinity at first glance, conventional gender norms are continuously and joyfully subverted, thereby

suggesting a willingness to experiment with gender norms in contemporary children's programming.

At the same time as these gender-conscious shows portray gentler or more sensitive masculinities, animated series like *Iron Man: Armored Adventures* and various other superhero or comic book titles celebrate traditional heroic displays of masculinity: The teenaged Tony Stark in *Armored Adventures* is a genius and a hero, but he is not a nerd and detests cracking open a book or doing research. One of his best friends is a girl, but she has to be protected from danger and taken to safety when a fight ensues. He might not have a hypermasculine body himself but wears impenetrable masculine armor and continuously engages in violence. *Armored Adventures* remains firmly lodged in a traditionally masculine space.

Given the popularity of superhero fare, more research has to be conducted before one may conclude for certain whether the emphasized gender concerns of shows such as *Gravity Falls* and *Steven Universe* point toward a larger trend in children's programming or if it has to be taken as evidence for transformations within certain genres rather than children's media as a whole. The longevity of cartoons such as *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe* suggest something other than mere exceptions to the rule, however, and highlight the importance of such further research.

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8. Appendix

8.1. English Abstract

This thesis investigates the gendered behavior of boys and men in US-American cartoons of the 2010s and asks whether contemporary series challenge traditional notions of masculinity. Children consume many hours of television each week, which has led researchers to call TV another kind of 'public school system' (qtd. in Wooden and Gillam 56) in which children pick up the values and ideologies of their culture. Much of contemporary children's programming is animated in nature and yet little academic work has focused on cartoons made for television or streaming services. Additionally, gender-related research in children's programming favors girls and femininity over boys, disregarding how traditional notions such as 'boys will be boys' or 'boys don't cry' are either reproduced or challenged by contemporary media productions.

At the heart of this thesis is a close analysis of two particular cartoons. *Gravity Falls* makes heavy use of parody to challenge hypermasculine values such as muscled bodies but fails to undermine the notions of aggressive competition and bullying, as well as the paradigm of hiding one's vulnerabilities and controlling one's emotions. *Steven Universe*, on the other hand, creates an environment in which boys and men openly share their emotions without being ridiculed, express their nurturing and supportive sides and take pride in traditionally feminine powers such as healing and shielding. Moreover, the show carefully cultivates the message that a balance between masculine and feminine traits is the key to a happy and fulfilling life, as well as the mark of successful heroes.

The analysis was able to conclude that there is a trend in animated shows for children of adventure/action/fantasy genres to experiment with binary gender norms, even if they do not always end up subverting them in meaningful ways.

8.2. German Abstract

Diese Arbeit untersucht das geschlechtsspezifische Verhalten von Jungen und Männern in US-amerikanischen Cartoons der 2010er Jahre und stellt die Frage ob zeitgenössische Serien traditionelle Auffassungen von Männlichkeit destabilisieren. Kinder konsumieren jede Woche viele Stunden an TV-Inhalten, was Forscher dazu gebracht hat, das Fernsehen als ein "öffentliches Schulsystem" (zitiert in Wooden und Gillam 56) zu bezeichnen, in welchem Kinder die Werte und Ideologien ihrer Kultur aufnehmen. Obwohl ein großer Teil der zeitgenössischen Kinderprogramme animiert ist und somit eine große ideelle Wirkung auf Jungen ausübt, konzentriert sich nur wenig akademische Arbeit auf Cartoons die für das Fernsehen oder Streaming-Dienste kreiert wurden. Darüber hinaus ziehen geschlechtsbezogene Analysen von Kinderprogrammen Mädchen und Weiblichkeit gegenüber Jungen und Männlichkeit vor und ignorieren die Art und Weise wie traditionelle Normen wie ‚Jungen dürfen nicht weinen' und ‚Jungen sind von Natur aus aggressiv' von zeitgenössischen Medienproduktionen entweder reproduziert oder in Frage gestellt werden.

Im Zentrum dieser Arbeit steht eine genaue Analyse von zwei Cartoons. *Gravity Falls* bevorzugt Parodie als Werkzeug um hypermaskuline Werte wie muskulöse Körper in Frage zu stellen, untergräbt jedoch nicht Werte wie dem aggressiven Wettbewerb oder Mobbing unter Männern und Jungen, sowie das Paradigma, Verletzlichkeiten zu verbergen und Emotionen zu unterdrücken. *Steven Universe* hingegen schafft eine Umgebung, in der Jungen und Männer offen ihre Gefühle teilen, ohne lächerlich gemacht zu werden. Sie können sogar stolz auf magische Fähigkeiten sein, die traditionell weibliche Konnotationen tragen. Darüber hinaus kultiviert die Serie sorgfältig die Botschaft, dass ein Gleichgewicht zwischen männlichen und weiblichen Merkmalen der Schlüssel zu einem glücklichen und erfüllten Leben sowie ein Zeichen erfolgreicher Helden ist.

Die vorliegende Analyse kommt zu dem Schluss, dass es bei animierten Serien der Abenteuer-, Action- und Fantasy-Genres einen Trend gibt, mit binären Geschlechternormen zu experimentieren, auch wenn sie diese nicht immer auf sinnvolle Weise unterwandern.