
NETFLIX'S STRANGER THINGS SEASON 2: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

The US streaming video service, Netflix, provides a vehicle for the expression of Western ideas and culture. One of the most powerful issues in Western culture currently is the role of women in society and their representation in pop culture. The second season of Stranger Things can be seen as a satiric deconstruction of masculine archetypes and an endorsement of female empowerment.

Keywords: Culture studies, Feminism, Film Studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Netflix is an American entertainment company founded in 1997. Originally Netflix operated as a mail-order DVD sales and rental company [1]. In 2007, Netflix pivoted its business model to begin online streaming of movies and other media. The company expanded internationally in 2010 when the streaming service was made available in Canada. Currently Netflix operates in over 190 countries. In 2013, Netflix began producing original content. Due to its global footprint and large library of media, both original and licensed, Netflix has developed into a culture juggernaut [2], representing Western values in the countries where they broadcast, several of which come from very different cultural traditions.

One of the key issues and that Western culture is dealing with is representation of women in popular culture. According to Smith et al [3] film is powerful agent for representing and modeling gender roles. Because of its global presence, Netflix is a powerful media force in presenting Western ideas about women and their role in society. This is especially true about the original content that Netflix produces and broadcasts.

One of the more popular of Netflix original shows is Stranger Things, an homage to 1980s American pop culture, especially the horror stylings of Steven King and the filmography of Steven Spielberg. Stranger Things is set in the rural Indiana, in the fictional town of Hawkins during the 1980s. Near the small town is the Hawkins National Laboratory that operates as part

of the United States Department of Energy, but also secretly conducts experiments into the supernatural. Some of these experiments are on people and the story focuses particularly on one adolescent girl who is known as Eleven.

This paper will describe the different ways that the male in female characters in the series are portrayed and discuss whether or not they represent a new or progressive vision of female empowerment.

2. MALE ROLES: JIM HOPPER

Jim Hopper (David Harbour) on the surface seems to represent a classic western ideal of masculinity. The Chief of Hawkins police has the rugged good looks and physicality of the traditional male. He smokes and drinks too much and fails to care for himself in the manner of men living outside the influence of female caregivers. In the first season the audience witnesses his transformation from a dissolute, near drunk to a man endowed with a quick intelligence and powerful competence. In the season finale, Hopper performed the classic hero's journey. He entered the labyrinth of the Upside Down, sought out and discovered the monster's lair. He completed his hero's quest by rescuing Will and restored him to life by performing CPR.

This demonstration of competence is the source of his failures in Season Two. Having acted as a hero, Hopper believes himself to be a hero. He believes that it is his role to solve problems and protect others. The typical male role. This brings him into conflict with Eleven whom he insists on keeping isolated in his cabin. He wants to protect her from government agents but also to protect himself from the loss of another child. Here he runs into the limits of his competence, driving Eleven away. And later he ventures alone into the tendril maze beneath the pumpkin patch. Having succeeded once, he has too much confidence in his abilities. He is attacked and almost dies. This expectation of male authority and responsibility is critically attacked again and again in the series.

2.1 Bobby Newby

The unfortunate Bobby Newby (Sean Astin) appears to represent the comfortable domestic security that the roguish Hopper cannot provide. Warmly affectionate to Joyce, he seems to value and wants to care for her. In fact, Bobby represents a similar cynical view of male competence, mental confidence to Hopper's physicality. Bobby refers to himself and takes pride in his high school nick-name, Bobby the Brain. He is proud of his ability to solve puzzles and it is he who deciphers Will's fevered scribbles and locates Hopper in the maze. He is not without skills or intelligence, but just as Hopper is overconfident in his physical ability to confront the monster alone, Bob believes that he is intelligent enough to counsel Will. Believing that understands what

is causing Will's stress, he gives him some terrible advice. He tells Will to stand his ground against the "bully" of the Upside Down and just tell him to "go away." The monster instead possesses Will and puts Will's troubles into overdrive. Bobby's greatest expression of overconfidence leads to his own death. Believing that only he has the skill and technical know-how needed, he volunteers to reboot the lab's computers. He succeeds in bringing the system back on line, but is devoured by a pack of Demogorgons. Males' faith in their competence is seen as critical flaw in the series.

2.2 Female Roles: Joyce

In contrast, each of the female characters' expressions of authority succeeds and, in fact, all of the key plot points turn on females expressing their power and authority. One of the 1980s movies that the Second Season references is the films of the Alien franchise. A group of soldiers are ambushed in the maze, a direct homage. Joyce Byers (Winona Rider) is the Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) of the Second Season. Joyce is not the single-white-female pursued by monsters in the dark of the first Alien movie. She is the mother-protectress of Alien 2, taking on everyone and everything that threatens her child. She fights with Dr. Owen (Paul Reiser) to be told the truth about Will's condition. And during the exorcism of the Shadow Monster who is possessing Will, it is Joyce who has the courage to increase the heat needed to force him out. Jonathon (Charlie Heaton), her eldest son, pleads with her to end the heat treatment, fearful that she is hurting him. Critically, Joyce persists, even scorching her son with a red hot poker from the fireplace in order to free Will from the monster. Jonathon is trying to lead as the male of the group, but Joyce asserts her own authority and frees her son.

2.3 Nancy

Similarly, Nancy (Natalie Dyer), Jonathon's love interest and Mike's older sister, sides with Joyce, preventing Jonathon from physically preventing Joyce from increasing the heat. Nancy provides leadership in another key area. She rejects Steve Harrington's (Joe Keery) efforts to keep her from investigating Barbara's (Shannon Purser) death. Nancy concocts the scheme to be captured by officials at the lab. Nancy records Dr. Owen's incriminating admissions and Nancy seeks out and contacts the reporter to help them expose the dark happenings at the lab.

3. DISCUSSION

Male efforts to control women by "protecting" them from too much information is a recurring plot point. Hopper, Dr. Owen, and Bobby all try to keep information from the women. The four boys in the party also try to "protect" Max from the truth about what is happening in Hawkins. But when her step-brother, Billy (Dacre Montgomery) arrives in a Camaro blasting Scorpions

and pheromones to terrorize the adolescents and beat the living snot out of Steve, while the boys watch helpless, Max grabs the syringe filled with Will's sedative and sticks their abuser in the neck. Max then takes the keys and drives the car, seizing another male prerogative, to lead the party back to the labyrinth.

4. CONCLUSION

Throughout the series the male characters conspire to protect the women from important knowledge and to assert authority over them. By the series finale, all of the characters have recognized their error. Hopper apologizes to Eleven and cedes the hero role to her, providing back up as she attempts to close the oddly vulva-shaped opening to the Upside Down. The boys welcome Max. Steve admits that he was wrong to Nancy and even Dr. Owen repents and helps to conceal Eleven. The males of the series are not beyond redemption, except, of course, the unfortunate, Bobby Newby, who is dead. Suggesting that perhaps, the one thing that women really can stand, is a guy who thinks they need to be cared for.

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