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**“THIS PLANET HAS AN EXPIRATION DATE,  
AND I AM NOT GOING TO STICK AROUND  
AND FIND OUT WHEN!”**

Environmental narratives in Steven Universe

## TIIVISTELMÄ

Elli Veikkola: “This planet has an expiration date, and I am not going to stick around and find out when!” – Ympäristökatastrofinarratiivit Steven Universessa

Kandidaatin tutkielma

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Tässä kandidaattitutkielmassa tarkastellaan ympäristökatastrofinarratiiveja kouluikäisille lapsille suunnatuissa animaatioissa. Viimeisen kymmenen vuoden aikana lasten animaatioihin on ilmestynyt kasvavissa määrin poliittisia teemoja, ensisijaisesti sateenkaarirepresentaation muodossa. Oma havaintoni oli, että animaatioissa saattaisi olla yhä enemmän myös ympäristöpoliittisia teemoja.

Tutkimuskysymykseni on: kuinka paljon ympäristöpoliittisia narratiiveja esiintyy ja kuinka ne esitetään? Tarkastelun kohteeksi valikoitui Steven Universe (Cartoon Network 2013–2019), koska sarja on laajasti tunnettu koko alaa muuttaneista poliittisista narratiiveistaan. Kandidaattitutkielmalle sopivaksi aineistoksi rajasin tarkastelun yhteen tarinalinjaan, joka oli sarjan ensimmäinen jaksorajat ylittävä tarina.

Aineistosta löysin neljä ympäristöpoliittista narratiivia: kauneus ja katastrofi-, heikot ihmiset-, diplomaattinen- sekä syyllisyys ja vastuu -narratiivit. Kauneus ja katastrofi -narratiivi kuvastaa, kuinka lastenmediassa perinteisesti käytettyä luonnon kauneuden kuvaamista voidaan hyödyntää osana katastrofinarratiivia. Heikot ihmiset -narratiivi kuvastaa sitä, kuinka sarjassa ihmiset kuvataan lähes poikkeuksetta heikkoina ja kykenemättöminä maailman pelastamiseen. Diplomaattisessa narratiivissa painotetaan viestiä siitä, että isotkin katastrofit voidaan välttää diplomatialla. Syyllisyys ja vastuu -narratiivissa korostuu taakka, jonka nuorempi sukupolvi kantaa vanhemman sukupolven virheiden seurauksena.

Kokonaisuudessaan sarjassa on selkeitä ympäristöpoliittisia narratiiveja, jotka esitetään lähinnä hahmolähtöisen kerronnan avulla. Katastrofinarratiivit ovat vahvasti liitännäisiä hahmojen omiin tarinoihin, persooniin ja kasvuun. Myös sosiaalipoliittiset ongelmat kietoutuvat vahvasti yhteen ympäristöpoliittisen kerronnan kanssa. Nämä yhdessä luovat samaistumispintaa katsojilleen.

Avainsanat: Poliittinen animaatio, Lastenmedia, Ympäristökatastrofi

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## I. INTRODUCTION

I have had an interest in cartoons since a very young age. From Disney classics to anime and most recently, western non-Disney animated series have charmed me with their art, music, and stories. As I have watched cartoons from many different countries and eras, I have come to notice some patterns. One of these is the “rise” of western animation during the 2010s. Art and storytelling got much better in quality and complexity.

It is no accident that a new era of western animation started during this decade. Walt Disney Animation Studios can be seen as the trendsetter for other western cartoons. Disney animation went through an experimental era from 1999 to 2008 when they tried to find a new direction for their entertainment. This resulted in movies that did not do too well in the box office. Then Disney released *Princess and the Frog* in 2009 and *Tangled* in 2010 starting a new, mostly CGI animated “revival era” which has become Disney’s most profitable era due to complex character arcs and interesting twist villains that resonate with the modern audiences. The most significant movie of this era is undoubtedly *Frozen* (2013) which re-shaped the industry forever. (Determan, 2021.)

At the same time, other studios started experimenting as well. First, there was the Brony phenomenon when *My Little Pony – Friendship is Magic* was launched in 2010. A show of pretty ponies collected a much-talked adult and teen fanbase. Bronies themselves claimed that they fell in love with the storytelling and pop-culture references of this new *My Little Pony* series (Angel, 2012). Also, Cartoon Network and Disney Channel started making their own series that would capture the interest of children and adults alike. This required complex characters and stories.

Along with the need for complex characters naturally came representation, especially for LGBT people. This has not been scientifically researched much yet, but for example, the gaming website Polygon claims that 2020 was the biggest year of LGBT representation in cartoons (Radulovic, 2020). Including representations of different genders and sexualities has become a norm in western animated series. This has become a problem in the international market. For example, the creator of *Steven Universe* (the series examined in this thesis) was told that she must be careful as her show could shut down just due to excessive LGBT representation which limits her chances in the international market. (Ibid.)

Political representation in cartoons is nothing new. Marya Christophini has researched peace and antiviolence in animation in her article *Into the Choppy Waters of Peace: An Inquiry into Peace- and Anti-Violence Animation* (2017). One of the animations in this article was the Krazy Kat - Peace Conference which was made as early as 1935 as a satire of peace negotiations. Although this animation is intended for the adult audience more than children as the series and movies mentioned above, animation as a form of art has had a political component for a long time.

Therefore children's animation seems to be getting more complex and more political, but cartoons have long had political components. As I have watched these new western series myself, I had come to notice and wonder about the presentation of environmental problems in animated series for children. I had noticed that there are some environmental aspects in these recent stories, but I was not sure to what extent and what modern western cartoons have to say about environmentalism. After all, climate change is one of the most complex and most urgent threats humanity faces. Does it gain nearly as much limelight as the presentation of social issues? How is this complex phenomenon handled in these stories? This is what piqued my interest in this topic.

For this research, I chose only one cartoon due to the limitations of the size of the study. I chose Steven Universe, as it is widely recognized for its ground-breaking LGBT representation. Steven Universe was originally released on Cartoon Network between November 2013 and January 2019, and it was later followed by a movie and an epilogue series. The creator of the series, Rebecca Sugar, has purposefully pushed for LGBT representation in her show. The show has been edited or banned in several countries where the human rights of LGBT people are lacking in general. Sugar also demanded to have a gay wedding in her series that ended up changing Cartoon Network policy about gay relationships. Nowadays gay relationships can be presented without separate permission in Cartoon Network shows, just as hetero relationships. (Cavna, 2020.)

Therefore, I wanted to see how the series that has had extensive effects on the animation industry as a whole and is already known for its political themes, fits with my remarks on environmental narratives in animation becoming more persistent.

## **II. THE AIM OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

This study aims to understand the climate catastrophe narratives in an animated series targeted at school-aged children. I wanted to get a picture of the extent of these narratives and how they were presented. My research question is: “To what extent are narratives of environmental catastrophes present in Steven Universe and how are they presented?” As there is no actual evidence of the usage of these narratives, I first wanted to map, if there is any and then I was able to analyze how they surface.

My main goal was to understand the usage of these narratives as they can prove to be very important for children of today as they are forced to become more environmentally aware due to the current condition of our planet. Because this topic has been researched very little in the past and the phenomena is quite new, I do not want to get into too much depth. I simply want to pin the narratives and see how they are used.

## **III. CATASTROPHES IN FICTION AND MEDIA – PREVIOUS STUDIES**

Catastrophes in fiction are nothing new. Within science fiction, dystopias are more of a defining factor than a trait. Dystopias are used to imagine possible and impossible futures that emerge after a big change: war, zombie apocalypse, or environmental catastrophe. These imagined worlds give room for societal criticism and philosophical thoughts. They aim to make their audience question their own lives and if they are already living in a dystopia. They also make us think about what kind of civilization we want to build in the future. The themes in these works change over time and their political standpoints change. When classical dystopian works like *1984* focus more on totalitarian issues that were very present during their time, today we have more and more works that focus on the doom of humanity as environmental problems and very complex social issues loom over our heads. (Paik, 2010, 1-22.)

According to Ailise Bulfin, “Popular culture images of environmental disasters have the potential dramatically and emotively to convey the dangers of climate change. Given that a significant number of people derive a substantial proportion of their information on the threat of climate change, or the “new human condition”, from popular culture works such as catastrophe movies, it is important that an investigation into the nature of the representations produced be embedded in the attempt to address

the issue.” (Bulfin 2017, 140.) She also argues that “Worries are repeatedly voiced that the focus on overwhelming catastrophes will lead to apathy, to the feeling that no kind of mitigation behavior, individual, collective, or international, will solve the problem.” (Ibid, 146.) If not leading to apathy, the problems in representation will arise, if the rogue genius is the one saving the day or if the viewers connect too deeply with the survivors and see themselves as one of them and not as one of the many who perished by the apocalypse (ibid, 146).

When discussing dystopian and/or fantasy fiction and catastrophe, there is a very extensive field of research. Some of these examples are the books *Environmentalism in the Realm of Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature* by Chris Baratta and *The Age of Dystopia: One Genre, Our Fears, and Our Future* by Louisa McKay. Research on the zombie genre seems to be its own field because it has had a huge rise in popularity in the early 2000s and a little afterward. According to Daniel Drezner, zombies are a distinguished part of genre literature because they demonstrate the breakdown of modern society when facing an external threat. These kinds of narratives are best formed, when the zombie sub-genre is as heterogeneous as possible, leaving room for descriptions of the future apocalyptic possibilities. (Drezner, 2014.)

It can be stated that catastrophe narratives have gotten attention in the field of literature and media, especially when it comes to speculative fiction. However, there is not much research regarding animation. The previous studies in this field seem to be focused mostly on Disney or Studio Ghibli.

Chris Hall has looked at environmentalism in movies by Hayao Miyazaki who is the most well-known filmmaker for Studio Ghibli. In his article: *Totoros, boar gods, and river spirits: Nature spirits as intermediaries in the animation of Hayao Miyazaki* Hall examines the more subtle signs of environmentalism in these movies that are mostly coded into storytelling very carefully or presented through symbolism. In these movies, there is a profound appreciation of nature, myths, and tradition. They are known for containing a lot of Japanese mythical and religious references that tie-up with environmentalism very neatly. (Hall, 2015.) This creates a fairytale-like feeling of nature and the focus is not on the climate catastrophe looming over our heads.

Peter Y. Paik has also analyzed two of Miyazaki’s movies: Princess Mononoke and Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind in his book *From utopia to apocalypse: Science fiction and the politics of catastrophe*. He mostly agrees with Hall as in his analysis he discusses how this fairy-tale-like representation in these very catastrophe-based movies creates sympathy and respect towards nature and it might even

act as an antithesis for the diminishing respect for nature in Japan where nature is traditionally seen as otherly but holy, not as something to be used (Paik, 93-122). Then again Paik goes deeper into character analysis and argues that humans are presented in two different ways: ruthless or gentle. Ruthless people exploit nature and gentle people see how holy it is and connect with it. The main characters are even made up to be messiah-like messengers of nature, which adds to the holiness and thematics (Ibid.).

As Miyazaki has been paving the way for environmentalism in animation for the last millennia, the big western animator Disney has also had its fair share of environmental themes from early on, even though not necessarily catastrophe-related. David Whitley argues in his book *The idea of nature in Disney Animation: From Snow White to WALL-E* that Disney films have a long tradition of ecological thematics. This tradition is aesthetically and emotionally rewarding to the viewers and has the potential to ground us in the environment that we are a part of. (Whitley, 2012.) Then again Whitley sees a clear shift from fairy-tale-like beauty to more complex descriptions of the environment. The feelings and problems regarding the environment have developed in Disney's storytelling in the same way. They have become more complex. (Ibid.)

In the light of these previous studies, it is meaningful to examine *Steven Universe*; whether it uses more traditional animation storytelling where nature is represented as holy and mystical or if it relies more on the tools of dystopian fiction. How these themes are represented as a part of a story targeted toward children and how environmentalism and environmental catastrophes are portrayed in the series.

#### **IV. STEVEN UNIVERSE AS A FORM OF SPECULATIVE FICTION**

According to Marek Oziewicz, the term *speculative fiction* is a super-category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating the "consensus reality" of everyday experience. Speculative fiction includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, superhero tales, alternate history, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, fractured fairy tales, and more. Rather than seeking a rigorous definition, a better approach is to theorize speculative fiction as a term whose semantic register has continued to expand. (Oziewicz, 2017.)



Even though speculative fiction is a very large umbrella term for many genres, in today's media there are very few "pure" genres anymore. This is because in storytelling it is already quite well accepted that all stories have been told and therefore, we need to mix old templates up a little bit. Still, some genre classifications are necessary as it affects the research of the story. In the case of my research, it is important to get a grasp of the characteristics of speculative fiction, as Steven Universe falls under this super-category, and it most likely uses those extra-terrestrial tools for its storytelling.

The Storytelling in Steven Universe has been researched before regarding representation, for which it is known. A Book: *Representation in Steven Universe* (Ziegler & Richards, 2020) has collected several scholarly articles that have examined speculative storytelling regarding representation in the series but not regarding environmental catastrophes. In speculative fiction, there is often a sense of "otherness" which makes it very effective to pass forward messages about race and colonization for example. However, this thesis aims to grasp the sense of otherness from the environmental point of view.

Steven Universe can be classified as science fiction and fantasy, and it could be put under the superhero subgenre. This classification is quite easy to make even with a very minimal understanding of the show. The show focuses on the conflicts that a group called the Crystal Gems faces. Crystal Gems were a rebel group of alien beings called gems. Gems are a species that have actual gems attached to their humanoid bodies and they are named after those gems. They conquer other planets for their reproduction. They incubate essence extracted from their overlords, the diamonds, to the ground and the essence becomes a gem by sucking all life out of the ground. When they have collected enough minerals into themselves, they burst out of the ground leaving a dead planet behind. The Crystal Gems noticed that life on earth is beautiful and worth protecting. This is why they turned on their kind and started a rebellion against the Diamond Authority.

The protagonist, Steven Universe himself was born thousands of years after the war. He is half-human, half gem hybrid. His mother was the leader of the rebellion, Rose Quartz, who fell in love with an aspiring musician Greg Universe. As gem's bodies are manifestations of light and not organic, Steven could not co-exist with his mother. He inherited his mother's pink gem and the magical powers that came with it. All gems have powers specific to their gems. Steven can for example summon a shield, heal humans and gems with his spit and form a protective bubble. He lives with three remaining Crystal Gems who help him with his powers as he grows up and learns about his powers and about his mother's legacy that he must deal with.

As it can be seen, there are very clear science fiction fragments like an interstellar alien species, but also very fantasy-like features such as gem powers being referred to as pure magic. Steven is the focus of the story and focuses on him saving the world which would put the series neatly into the superhero category even though it is by no means a stereotypical superhero story.

## V. MATERIAL – THE CLUSTER ARC

In the introduction, I explained why I chose Steven Universe as the focus of my analysis. Unfortunately, the scope of a bachelor's thesis is quite narrow, and it was impossible to look at the whole series that has run for five seasons. In the end, I chose to look at a particular arc of the story, the cluster arc, which was the very first overarching story in the series. This choice was made because the main threat for the characters and the planet during this arc is a geo weapon called the cluster. The cluster is a huge composition of gems placed in the center of the earth and its purpose is to tear apart the planet. I felt that this kind of looming catastrophe could provide at least a sneak peek at if the series uses environmental narratives when telling this kind of fantasy-adventure story.

Steven universe is known among fans to have lots of filler episodes. "Filler" in the context of fandoms means episodes that do not add to the actual overarching plotline but are rather aiming to be more fun stand-alone episodes. I used my knowledge of the series as well as fan-made lists to determine which episodes were crucial for the understanding of the story. Even after cutting off the filler episodes, the episode take was too large and thus I ended up cutting world-building episodes as well. World-building episodes are episodes that add to the story by explaining the world better, but nothing important happens. The episodes I was left with are listed below:

Season 1:

- Episodes 25-26
- Episode 37
- Episode 40
- Episode 44
- Episode 50
- Episodes 52-53
- Total of 8 episodes

Season 2:

- Episodes 1-2
- Episode 7
- Episodes 9-11
- Episodes 14-15
- Episodes 17-21
- Episodes 23-25
- Total of 16 episodes

Season 3:

- Episodes 1-2
- Total of 2 episodes

This means there were 26 eleven-minute episodes and thus 286 minutes of material to go through. Even if I needed to make extensive cuts to the episodes, this list is still very generous and includes every episode where even a small thing related to the big plot happens. Therefore, there was still quite a bit of filler inside the episodes, but this oftentimes contributed to the bigger themes of the stories and turned out to be important. Because of this, I must note the limitation of focusing solely on these episodes. The filler can also be important to the narratives, and this should be kept in mind.

## **VI. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AS A METHOD**

Narrative analysis refers to several analytic methods for interpreting texts or visual data that are presented in a form of a story. The basis of narrative methods is that people tell stories to help organize their life experiences and that this organization process is presented purposefully and structurally through stories. Different approaches to narrative analysis can be categorized based on whether they focus on the narrative content or structure, with the thematic version interrogating what a story is about, while the structural version asks how a story is composed to achieve communicative aims. (Figgou, & Pavlopoulos 2015).

In the film, narratives usually revolve around binary oppositions like good/bad, masculinity/femininity, or old/new. These oppositions create tension and contrast that can be used to create humor, themes, and whole story arcs (Bignell, 2012, 99-103). Even though many narratives

are binary, not all of them are and sometimes they do not serve as big of a purpose as big, trend-setting narratives. These are used to create depth and meaning to the story, especially if the story has an aim to be realistic. In science fiction, redundant narratives deepen the world and the characters, and they can also be used to create mystery by switching the main and the redundant narratives. If this is done, a seemingly unimportant storyline becomes the main focus. In serialized stories like tv-series, the redundant narratives are naturally persistent as there are many small stories inside of the big one (ibid).

In narrative analysis, it is important to recognize authorship: who did the television text and why. One also has to think about the resources that are used to make the film like how much money they have for production. It is also important to think about directors, writers, and composers and their parts in the authorship (ibid, 106-108). The narrative analysis also requires the separation between a story and discourse. A story is a complete product that is manufactured through the events. Discourse is the narrating process of the story. For example, the story might not happen in chronological order. Then the chosen order of sequences is the discourse, but the bigger picture formed is the story.

Last of all narrative analysis method in film needs an understanding of viewer identification and signs of the viewer (ibid, 104-121). Viewers always identify with the characters to some extent. In advertisements, the character using the product is supposed to represent the viewer themselves and thus see themselves using the product. In storytelling, characters should be likable to the viewer which makes them want to live the adventure with the character. It must be noted that every viewing experience is different and leads to different kinds of identifications or the source material might fail to create identification. (Ibid, 104-121). Besides identification, the viewer can be connected by leaving signs of the viewer, which can be done in several ways (ibid, 104-121). For example, there might be something familiar making the connection to the story, breaking the fourth wall, etc.

The Series was familiar to me before this study, but I had not examined it in depth regarding environmental narratives. I managed to find four different storylines that had underlying environmental themes. Two of them were strongly related to the previous studies with some new points added to them. One of the narratives was loosely connected to the previous studies and the last one was wholly new. Next, I will discuss these narratives in more depth.

## **VII. ANALYSIS**

### **1.1. Main findings**

The main findings from the cluster arc can be divided into narratives: Beauty meets catastrophe-, Weak humans-, Diplomatic- and Guilt and responsibility -narrative. The first three are linked a lot to traditional storytelling devices in stories produced for children. Beauty meets catastrophe is linked to environmentally aware representation through setting but also connecting it to the actual plot and not leaving it as a side hassle. Weak humans are strongly due to weaknesses of the show's writing and the premise and raise similar issues as many pieces of children's entertainment for the main child characters being the most capable actors in most of the cases. A diplomatic narrative is a result of an alteration of the traditional good vs. bad narratives. Guilt and responsibility is the only narrative that is not that strongly linked to traditional children's storytelling but rather to the characterization and never political themes that are presented.

### **1.2. Beauty meets catastrophe**

Settings are very important in literature and other media, but especially in stories targeted at children as it helps to create symbolism and connotations that help to understand the story. The skills for visual interpretation of stories develop earlier than the verbal ones and thus imagery is important to children specifically. It is very important to note, where the adventure is happening and why it is happening there. This helps to build the story and present the themes in a more accessible way to children. (Dewan 2010.)

Traditionally environmentalism in children's literature and media is not presented through catastrophe narratives but rather by the beauty of nature and a connection with it. This is a sense of nature appreciation is built through settings rather than the actual plot. For example, trees are often used to create a sense of security (ibid. 145-148.) If there is a fairy-tale forest with a lot of trees, children learn to associate the beautiful natural setting with safety, wonder, and magic.

In animation, there is even more room to use the power of place and imagery as it is visual media. It can be used as a powerful tool to create associations towards different themes, including environmentalism. As stated in the chapter on previous studies, there is very little research on this,

but one example of this in animation can be seen in the movies of Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli. In these movies, it is mostly coded into storytelling and symbolism (Hall, 2020). In Disney movies, there has been a shift. When old Disney movies focus more on the beauty of nature, newer, especially Pixar films tackle more catastrophe narratives (Whitley, 2012).

Steven Universe does use the traditional beauty narrative a lot. Earth is presented as a beautiful place full of life and the background art is made to be very beautiful. This can be seen for example in the episode *The Answer* (season 2 episode 21). In the episode, Ruby and Sapphire are venturing on earth for the very first time. The scenery is supposed to be romantic because it supports the story in the said episode but still this kind of scenery plays out throughout the episodes. There are a lot of pictures of nature and the countryside that romanticize and bring value to the beauty of nature.



Image 1. *The Answer* (season 2 episode 21)

This is no coincidence and has been a conscious choice by the crew. The background art for the episode *The Answer* is by artist Elle Michalka and in a series of art and concept book, *Steven Universe – art and origins*, it is stated that these backgrounds were specifically created to create a romantic picture of the earth that is supposed to support the love story in the episode but also frame earth as a place where they can be together (McDonnell et al, 2017, 184 -185).

As stated before, the beauty of organic life is something that the gem civilization does not know how to appreciate. This is something that brings together the traditional beauty narrative with the catastrophe narrative. This is seen the best through Peridot's story arc. She is a Home World gem that came to destroy the earth, but then falls in love with it and learns to appreciate it which motivates her to save the earth and not just herself.

Below is one Peridot quote that demonstrates her feelings toward the earth before her capture in the episode Friend Ship (season 2 episode 14):

*Peridot: This Planet has an expiration date, and I am not going to stick around and find out when!*

Earth is just another job assignment for her, and she wants to leave as soon as possible. Later, when she is captured, Steven teaches her about the rain in the episode When It Rains (season 2 episode 18), and she sees the earth in a new light for the very first time. She is shown to be amazed by this new phenomenon called rain.



Image 2. When It Rains (Season 2 Episode 18)

This makes her want to share her information about the upcoming crisis with Steven. She has been on earth for several months, but she had to experience this paradigm shift to truly see the earth as a valuable place. After this rain scene earth is no longer just a floating rock in space that she must destroy. It has become a beautiful place with endless possibilities for happiness. This same narrative is seen in the stories of all of the older Crystal Gems (Pearl, Ruby, Sapphire, and Rose Quartz). They all were sent to earth to destroy it but decided against it after seeing the beauty of the planet.

Peridot grows to love the planet even more but is still very bound by gem society's norms. Thus, she later tries to tell her diamond about her findings. She thinks that Yellow Diamond is a perfectly rational being and thus tries to explain the situation to her in the episode Message Received (season 2 episode 24):

*Peridot: The organic ecosystem creates resources unique to this world. We cannot sacrifice all that potential just for one geo weapon! I'd like to tell you some plans I came up with to utilize the planet without disturbing the local...*

*Yellow Diamond: I have heard enough! I don't care about potential and resources.*

*Peridot: What?*

*Yellow Diamond: I want my cluster and I want that planet to die. Just make that happen.*

*Peridot: No!*

*Yellow Diamond: Are you questioning my authority?*

*Peridot: I am questioning your objectivity! My Diamond!*

*Yellow Diamond: You are out of line.*

*Peridot: I just think...*

*Yellow Diamond: I am not interested in puny thoughts of a peridot. You have disrespected this channel and my time with your presence, and you would do well to shut your mouth! You have failed at every stage of this mission. Your only chance to redeem yourself is to obey this simple order. You are to leave the cluster to grow. It will tear apart the earth and I will take immense satisfaction in erasing that hideous rock off our star maps! Is that clear?*

*Peridot: I won't do it! I can tell you with certainty there are things on this planet worth protecting!*

*Yellow Diamond: What do you know about the earth?*

*Peridot: Apparently more than you! You... Clod!*

And Peridot is right. She knows more about the earth than her diamond. She has made an emotional connection with the beauty of the planet and as she states, her diamond has no objectivity. She sees the planet from a gem point of view: something to be used for their satisfaction and benefit. Peridot sees it as a beautiful place full of potential that could be used without destroying it.

Therefore, it can be stated that the series uses the traditional side of environmentalism when it highlights the earth's beauty, but it also gives a fresh perspective on how the appreciation gained from admiring the wonders of earth can lead to a drive for protecting that beauty. Ruby and Sapphire found romance on earth and Peridot was motivated to save the earth from destruction after seeing its sentimental value.

### **1.3. Weak humans**



There is a lot of research on children and climate/environmental action. One example is by Iliopoulou (2018): a study where children's mental models regarding forest destruction and waste were mapped through interviews. It was found that the two thought processes that the children most likely went through were immediate action or prevention. This shows that children require climate action on the small scale rather than thinking of very vague climate goals. It does make sense because children are at a developmental stage where their immediate surroundings and themselves are the focus of their own stories.

In Steven Universe, climate action is not represented as something we simple humans can do by ourselves, because the environmental threat is a creation of extraterrestrial enemies. This eventually led to a narrative, where humans are presented as weaklings and aliens as the actual threat to earth and human existence. Throughout the episodes, Steven, his father, and other humans are belittled by the gems for being weak and incapable. For example, in the episode Log Date 7 15 2 (season 2 episode 25), Peridot pushes Greg off the roof. Garnet manages to save him, and an exchange occurs:

*Garnet: Peridot! You cannot just push Greg off the roof!*

*Peridot: Why not?*

*Garnet: He is a human! He is soft and fragile!*

*Greg: Hey! It is not like a sixpack can save you from that height!*

Story-wise this is very logical as the Gems are thousands of years old and cannot die unless their gem is broken. Compared to humans they are much stronger and have a lot more life experience. Also, their society is built upon the superiority of their species. They see themselves as a race that is made to conquer other planets. They are un-organic, and they do not have any appreciation for organic life. This can be seen for example in Peridot's exchange with Yellow Diamond in the episode Message Received (season 2 episode 24):

*Yellow Diamond: How is the earth?*

*Peridot: It's... full of life!*

*Yellow Diamond: Organic life (Spitefully)*

Humans are also very useless for the most part when it comes to gem-related issues and are many times used for humor. During the episodes, Mirror Gem and Ocean Gem (season 1 episodes 25-26) the mayor is seen trying to fill the ocean with the hose after it is gone by Lapis Lazuli.



Image 3. Ocean Gem (season 1 episode 26)

Greg, Steven, and Connie are the only humans who even try to be useful. Greg is often dismissed, and he also tries to stay out as he is afraid that he could interrupt Steven's training. Connie on the other hand is getting sword fighting lessons from Pearl and therefore is much more in contact with the gems and much more trained than the average human. Despite her being in training and familiar with the dangers of Steven's life, even Steven, her best friend, considers her to be less strong than him. This can be seen in the song Full Disclosure (season 2 episode 1):

*Steven: Everybody tells me life is precious on the planet earth and that means you and I have to protect you. If somehow you get hurt, what do I do? I don't want that for you.*

Therefore, humans are portrayed as weak and sometimes even stupid. The threat to the planet is coming entirely from the gems. This portrayal becomes problematic when presenting environmental issues. As research shows, humans are the biggest contributor to climate change and thus the destruction of the earth. When the threat comes from aliens and humans are presented as a part of the life on earth, this takes away from the possible narrative that humans are also to blame. Gems and Steven protect the earth from other gems invading the earth but who protects the earth from humans?

#### **1.4. Diplomacy**

When thinking about traditional children's animation in western countries, there are usually very clear lines drawn between good and evil. The distinction is made starting from the design and finishing with the story. Children learn to differentiate characters as good and evil from their looks to even

their facial expressions (Obiols-Suari & Marco-Pallarés, 2021). Creator of another animated series of this era, Lauren Faust, who created My Little Pony Friendship is Magic, states on her DeviantArt account that one of the characters, princess Celestia, was originally meant to be queen Celestia, but Hasbro as the producing company stated that queens are associated as evil and princesses as good because of Disney and it can be harder to sell toys that are labeled queen Celestia. Of course, it is sure that this mentality changed a lot after Disney's Frozen as Elsa is a queen (Faust, 2010)

As stated before, when the narrative analysis was discussed as a method, narratives rely heavily on binary opposition (Bignell, 2012). The most traditional binary opposition might be the one between good and evil. The opposition creates tension and takes and tells us what the story is about. In the case of Steven Universe, the clearest binary opposition is between the gems who appreciate the earth and those who do not. Of course, simple narratives make simple storylines. If the good and bad are just good and bad in the stereotypical sense, it takes away meaning and depth from the bigger picture.

As Obiols-Suari & Marco-Pallarés (2021) found in their study, children did the final judgment on if the character is evil or not, by their actions, not by their looks. It is therefore fair to think that children can handle more complex characters that are not necessarily good or evil but something in between. The character who looked bad might just be misunderstood and as the study showed, children can contradict what they first thought if the character is shown to act against their initial thought. Steven Universe acknowledges that children can comprehend these stories and use them to create a diplomatic narrative. All the antagonists eventually get to explain themselves when the audience can understand them better and sympathize with them.

For example, Lapis Lazuli is from the very beginning painted as a very mysterious character. Her eyes are glassy, and she is shown to be nice to Steven but hostile towards the gems. Then later she is painted as bad because she takes the ocean away and attacks Steven, the gems, Connie, Greg, and Lion (Mirror Gem, Ocean Gem season 1 episodes 25-26).

Then she lets Steven talk to her and again, her position shifts. She says that She is only using the ocean so that she could reach home. This makes the viewer truly understand her motives and how they relate to Steven's motives. Lapis took the ocean, resulting in environmental catastrophe, but just because she wants to go home, and Steven wants the ocean back because it is a part of his home (Ocean Gem season 1 episode 26).

*Lapis: I just wanna go home*

*Steven: I know how important home can be, but that is why I am here. You took the ocean away and the ocean is an important part of my home.*

*Lapis: I am only using the ocean because my gem is cracked. If I could just stretch it far enough...*

*Oh, this is never going to work!*

*Steven: Ah! I can fix your gem! I have healing powers!*



Image 4. Ocean Gem (season 1 episode 26)

Even after this, it is hard to tell if Lapis is good or bad, but what becomes clear is that her actions are most often driven by her fear and longing for safety. Themes many can certainly relate to. She has a lot of traumas on her shoulders, and she just wants herself and those she cares about to be safe. In the example above, Steven resolves the conflict just by talking to Lapis. She might have been the antagonist of the episode but not the villain and Steven showed that to the audience.

The same continues with Peridot. In the episode, The Return (season 1 episode 52) Steven states:

*Steven: Maybe when Peridot gets to earth, she will see how nice all the people are and she won't want to hurt anyone*

This shows how Steven is at his core: a very empathetic kid who always wants to see the good in people and gems. This attitude helps him solve a lot of political problems on the way. When Peridot insults Pearl for being a servant gem and Amethyst for being defective, Steven finds peaceful solutions to their problems. Steven suggests that Pearl and Peridot build robots to see who the best

engineer is, and Peridot ends up understanding that Pearl is very good with technology even though that is not what she was made for (Back to the Barn season 2 episode 19). Then when she insulted Amethyst in the episode Too Far, Steven talks to her about it (Too Far season 2 episode 20).

The biggest incident with Peridot is when they discuss the plan for a finished earth colony in the episode It Could've Been Great (season 2 episode 23). She sees the plan for the earth as beautiful when crystal gems are horrified by it. This leads to a disagreement and Steven must talk Garnet out of beating Peridot up. After that he and Peridot talk:



Image 5. It Could've Been Great (season 2 episode 23)

*Peridot: What did I say? I was just stating a fact! The rebellion didn't really save the earth. It just delayed the inevitable!*

*Steven: That is not the way they see it. They spent thousands of years trying to protect the earth. I thought maybe you finally understood why.*

Even though Peridot is far already with her redemption at this point of the plot, she is still on the fence. She has made some good actions and many bad ones. As Lapis has her reactions coming from fear, Peridot acts out of duty. This is understandable as she must contradict everything she has been taught in her life. That takes time but from episode to episode, Steven talks to her and gets her closer to their side until she finally becomes one of the good guys.

Lastly, this happens with the biggest threat that is the environmental catastrophe itself: the cluster. Steven uses his empathetic powers to talk to the cluster in the episode Gem Drill (season 3 episode 2).

*Cluster: Need form! To be whole...*

*Steven: Whole? Oh! Your shards! You just want to find the rest of your gems. Forming won't help you find the rest of yourselves! You'll just destroy the earth!*

Again, he gets through even with the actual geo weapon and prevents the destruction of the earth just by talking. Even the ultimate threat is not evil. It is just a bunch of broken minds trying to get back together. Steven stops several political and environmental catastrophes just by talking.

This would not be possible with traditional villains as they have no actual motives besides being evil. Having antagonists with grey morals allows the show to present this diplomatic narrative where all opponents can be brought to change their minds when their standing point is understood and when they are presented with an alternative one. Especially Peridot seems like a villain at first but proves to be quite a sensible Dorito humanoid.

This narrative gives hope regarding environmental issues. In economics environmental problems are usually discussed with the prisoner's dilemma portraying that someone is always losing and that there are no real winners. Many times, it is asked who is to blame for climate change. The media likes to try to find someone specific to blame and many politicians would gladly take the burden off their shoulders (Timperley, 2020). If not effective and realistic, at least the narrative of solving these big issues by not blaming each other but coming together is very beautiful and comforting. It also gets children to empathize not just with Steven but also with the ones he goes against, and role-taking is known to be beneficial for the development of empathy (Strelkova, 2020).

## **1.5. Guilt and Responsibility**

According to Rebecca Sugar, in the end, Steven Universe is a story about family and her own family has been a big inspiration for it. Beach city was inspired by the city in Maryland where she would travel with her family during the summer holidays. The titular character Steven is named after Sugar's brother and the Crystal Gems represent different ways she acts around her brother. She has also gotten

art inspiration from her parents. (McDonnell et al, 13-15.) Thematically the show circles a lot around love and family relationships even if the premise is more about the destruction of the earth. Therefore, it could be said that the show portrays a family in a middle of a crisis.

Climate change and the idea of an environmental catastrophe resulting from it can be discussed from the point of view of the burden that is placed upon children by the generations before them. Children are at greater risk to feel the effects of climate change as they will have to adapt to it in the future. Especially children from less advantaged backgrounds will have to carry the burden. They will see how the change affects them and their parents. There is also an increasing amount of evidence of the psychosocial impacts of climate change on children. Climate-related extreme weather events have been linked to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, and cognitive deficits, for example. (Sanson & Burke 2019.)

The great effect that climate change has on children in the family is portrayed carefully and beautifully in the series by addressing difficult themes such as the guilt of the older generations and the responsibility of younger generations, who will inevitably feel the most severe consequences and are already the ones who suffer the most. In the series, two sub-storylines portray this: the relationship between Amethyst and Pearl, and Steven owning up to his mother's mistakes. These two cases differ because Amethyst and Pearl can communicate about it, but Steven cannot do the same with his dead mother. This shows these two situations in different lighting.

Pearl and Amethyst are most of the time portrayed in a sisterly fashion. They argue, get on each other's nerves, and see each other as somewhat equal members of the team. Because Gems were never kids, they are both on adult levels of cognitive functioning, even though Pearl sees Amethyst as immature from time to time. Besides all of this, they come from two different generations. Pearl is thousands of years older than Amethyst. Pearl was one of the invaders of earth and Amethyst was one of the gems made on earth. This makes them see the invasion and the harm it caused from two different standing points. Pearl feels guilty about being part of the invasion and Amethyst feels quilt for being the product of it. This can be seen very well from their dialogue in the episode On The Run (season 1 episode 40):

*Pearl: Amethyst, I had no idea you have been upset about this?*

*Amethyst: Oh?! You had no idea?! Hah! This is like my entire existence! You want to pretend that none of this ever happened! You think I am just a big mistake!*

*Pearl: No, no, Amethyst! You are not a mistake! You are just a by-product... of a big mistake... No... That is not... I... I just never thought of this as you. None of this is your fault! You did not build this place! I... I am sorry Amethyst. I hope you can forgive me. You are the one good thing that came out of this mess. I always thought you were proud of that.*



Image 6. On the Run. (Season 1, Episode 40)

Pearl is resentful toward her own mistake, but miscommunication made Amethyst feel as if she is to blame for the effects, she can see around her. The way the older gems talk about gem production as a bad thing that was destroying life on earth, made her internalize the guilt and thus leading to issues of self-worth. This relates to intergenerational trauma and why children will be affected strongly.

Steven's situation could be seen as a reverse of Amethyst's. He grows up hearing how amazing his mother was, and he always wanted to be like her. The first real turning point in his thinking happens during the episode The Return (Season 1, Episode 52), when his father tells him the truth about gems, what they were doing to the earth and how Steven's mother started the rebellion:

*Greg: She (Rose Quartz) gave up everything just to stop what they started here and drive the invading gems off the earth.*

*Steven: So, she saved the world! That's good!*



*Greg: Eh, not such a thing as a good war, kiddo. Gems were destroyed. People too. In the end, your mother could only save a handful of her closest friends. If it weren't for her shield... Man... I don't know.*

After this Steven demands to go fight the Home World gems as he has his mother's shield. He feels that as his mother is gone, and as he has her powers, he cannot do anything else but rise and take his mother's place as the protector of the earth. Steven occasionally feels guilty for his mother not being around and feels that the gems blame him for it, adding to his pressure to finish what his mother started and fix her mistakes along the way. Again, he is the youngest of the gems and carries the biggest burden as an heir of some sort.

This narrative shows how family dynamics work in trauma-filled environments, which can include climate catastrophe. The youngest ones often feel the results as they are more vulnerable and will also feel the effects in the future. The show manages to represent these kinds of issues very well, even if these grimmer themes do not get that much limelight. This is a children's show after all.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION**

To conclude, in this thesis I argue that environmental narratives in Steven Universe are prominent but also tied up with the character arcs and not all potential for environmental stories is used. Many of the defects but also the advances are claimed through the storytelling and how successful it is at portraying the intended message. Animation as a political narrator for children is yet very unknown but there sure are indications that would suggest that they measure at least to their counterparts on paper.

Steven Universe is known as a show that provides a spotlight on social issues and manages to have representation through diverse characters and cast, but environmentalism is also a great part of the show and the premise. Environmental narratives are clear, and they take a lot of room in the scale of the bigger stories as the biggest threats in the series are usually the environmental ones. Social aspects are still the focus as the Diplomatic narrative suggests. This does not mean that environmental themes are pushed to the background, quite the contrary. The social problems are paired with environmental ones, and they are presented through the experiences and actions of the characters. In other words,

environmental narratives are presented through political actors. This kind of presentation helps produce stories that can resonate with people entangled in environmental issues.

This kind of personified problem presentation can be very effectful. I would still argue that the series has a lot of lost potential because there are not many everyday climate actions, but the narratives are more focused on a larger scale action. Of course, we are talking about a speculative series over here, but still, the everyday actions of the characters and representing humans as weak prey do not support the environmental narratives well.

Steven Universe is not the only series that has similar themes and settings. Thus, there would be a lot of room for follow-up research. Series from the same era as My Little Pony FiM or Gravity Falls would be interesting to investigate on their own but also as comparative research. From newer animation a very similar series She-Ra the Princesses of Power would enlighten the subject in a more recent story and a complete high fantasy/Sci-Fi setting. Environmental narratives in children's media could be researched further in general and their effectiveness on the viewers would include some unused research territory.

It was truly fascinating to examine a series dear to me and see things I have not been able to see before. I was aware that there were some environmental themes, but the extent and prominence surprised me. This again shows that one really must look to see the narratives. We live in a world where we can already experience the effects of climate change and vanishing biodiversity. It will be interesting to see if these climate narratives become more visible in the future. Will there be stories thematically addressing climate issues or will these narratives always be pushed to the side? I would argue that there is a need for these stories, but could they be the center of attention without being too preachy? There certainly would be plenty of room to explore these aspects in the future.

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