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# Communication of Difficult Emotions and Mental States in the Animated Series *Steven Universe*

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to examine the use of conceptual metaphor in the animated series *Steven Universe*. We aim to show that the series addresses sensitive issues such as personality disorders, abusive relationships, and the effects of past trauma through the use of conceptual metaphors, both verbal and visual. We believe that conceptual metaphors can help reframe difficult emotional and mental states, which has been recognized in therapy and counselling. We also compare the metaphors identified in therapeutic discourse with those found in the series.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, visual metaphor, personality issues, therapy, *Steven Universe*

## 1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to investigate how difficult mental and emotional states are metaphorically communicated in the fantasy animated series *Steven Universe.* We chose this series not only because it shows characters going through pain and grief, battling their feelings, or suffering from emotional illness or abuse but also because it does it indirectly, embedding difficult psychological issues in the plot, and recruiting diverse verbal and visual metaphors. We believe that metaphorization of challenging psychological states can foster alternative, more productive and positive construals at least in some viewers and thus have a therapeutic effect. The role of metaphor in therapy and in expressing difficult emotions has been subject of comprehensive research, briefly outlined below. In this paper, however, we want to present a case study focusing on selected characters from *Steven Universe*, to draw

attention to how a popular show can help build mental resilience in its audience, and to compare the metaphors used in the show with the metaphors of difficult psychological and emotional states described in the literature.

Methodologically our analysis is grounded in the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as formulated initially by Lakoff/Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1993) or Johnson (1987), and developed later by, for example, Kövecses (2002) and Kövecses (2020). While the CMT approach to language and cognition is not accepted without criticism (see: Gibbs 2009 for an overview; Keysar et al. 2000), we believe that it does offer useful tools for analysing linguistic and visual data which deal with expression of difficult emotions or mental disorders as demonstrated by Boylstein et al. (2007), Forceville/Paling (2018), Mould et al. (2010) or Saji/Venkatesan (2022).

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, we briefly present the assumptions of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory as well as research on the use of metaphor in therapeutic contexts. Next, an outline of the show's synopsis follows. Then, in successive sections, we focus on selected characters and discuss how the show figuratively depicts personality disorders, abusive relationships, and impact of past trauma. Finally, we briefly compare the metaphors used in the show with those identified in therapeutic discourse.

## 2. Theoretical background

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory makes two assumptions important for our analysis. One is that human thinking and reasoning, and consequently making sense of the world and ourselves, can operate on the basis of metaphorical projections between a more familiar, often more concrete domain (i.e. source domain) and a less familiar, often more abstract or vague domain (i.e. target domain). Such projections or mappings can manifest themselves in language as linguistic metaphors, but also through the visual modality, as visual metaphors, or through more than one modality, as multimodal metaphors (see: e.g. Forceville 2009; Forceville/Urios-Aparisi 2009). In the most general sense, a conceptual metaphor appears whenever one domain of experience is communicated (verbally or otherwise) by means of another domain. This understanding underpinned our approach to metaphor identification: for example, if a domain of abusive relationship (target domain) was depicted in terms of physically merging two characters into one (source domain), we analysed it as a conceptual metaphor. The other important assumption is that by inferences and entailments metaphors can impact our understanding of the

target domain (cf. Kövecses 2002: Ch. 7, 8). For example, the well-known metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR not only highlights antagonistic nature of an argument, but also entails that its participants are enemies, that the result of an argument is to lose or to win, and that therefore all means should be used to win or to defend oneself. On the other hand, conceptualizing argument as a journey highlights progress and entails cooperation to achieve common goals. Thus, when our experiential knowledge about the source domain is projected onto the target domain, our understanding of the target is altered to a certain extent.

Vast body of research has demonstrated the significance of conceptual metaphor in all areas of human experience and activity, starting with everyday language (e.g. Lakoff/Johnson 1980), through philosophy (e.g. Lakoff/Johnson 1999), natural sciences (e.g. Brown 2003; Drogosz 2019; Zawisławska 2011), mathematics (e.g. Lakoff/Núñez 2000), music (e.g. Zbikowski 2008), or politics (e.g. Lakoff 1991; 1996; Sandikcioglu 2003). Conceptual metaphors have been found to shape and impact value systems (Krzeszowski 1997) and, obviously, emotions (e.g. Fussell 2002; Kövecses 1986). All that research confirmed what Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 156) stated over fifty years ago: "Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies".

The fact that metaphor is a valuable tool of self-understanding and thus of therapy was recognized by practicing counsellors and therapists well before the advent of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory:

> Metaphoric language has been an important therapeutic tool since the first counselor attempted to understand fully a client's experience of the world. Traditionally, counselors have developed metaphors to demonstrate empathy and to suggest alternative interpretations of presenting problems. This use of metaphor, created by the counselor, does not change a client's problems; rather, it changes perception of the problem and allows for solutions as yet unconsidered. In this manner, metaphor has provided both a linguistic tool to facilitate empathy and an intervention technique with a history of therapeutic value (Wickman et al. 1999: 389).

For example, Milton Erickson, an American psychologist, developed a method of therapy that involved creating stories and jokes that were structurally similar to the client's situation. These stories did not directly mention his clients in any way, but by drawing analogies they were able to gain insights about themselves (Wickman et al. 1999: 390). Also, an analysis of a recorded therapeutic session

between Carl Rogers and Gloria in 1964 has revealed his intuitive yet successful use of the metaphors SELF IS A CONTAINER, KNOWING IS FEELING or KNOWING ONESELF IS SEEING ONESELF THROUGH OTHERS' EYES (Wickman/Campbell 2003).

The application of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory allows for a more systematic analysis of psychological conditions. Expression of difficult emotions, often with implications for therapy, was the subject of numerous studies within this framework. Let us begin with research into verbal metaphors. For example, McMullen/Conway (2002) compared typical metaphors of depression in the past centuries described by Jackson (1986) (i.e. comparing melancholy to darkness, weight, and being slowed down) with conventional metaphors of depression in contemporary American English. Based on how clients in psychotherapy described their experience of depression to their therapists, they found that the typical metaphors were: DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS (often extended to likening depression to cloudy, rainy weather), DEPRESSION IS WEIGHT, DEPRESSION IS CAPTOR (with an emphasis on a sense of restriction), and DEPRESSION IS DESCENT. The same metaphors were identified by Charteris-Black (2012) who investigated whether or not the expression of depression is gendered. In his study of interviews with people who had experienced depression, he also noticed metaphors of containment and constraint, with the "self" conceptualized as contained within a depression but also as a container for sad feelings that cannot be released.

Research into metaphorical expression of mental issues was not restricted to depression. Boylstein et al. (2007) discussed metaphors that stroke victims use to describe their experience (i.e. comparing it to a disaster, surviving the crash, rebuilding after the hurricane, or war) and how these metaphors reflect changes in their physical functioning, self-reported depression level, and self-identity. What is more, the authors believe that clinicians can help survivors shift the meaning of post-stroke experience and risk of long-term depression by shifting metaphors. Mould et al. (2010) investigated the use of metaphor for understanding and managing psychotic experiences. They begin with the assertion that "subjective experiences of psychotic disorders are often not communicated because of the difficulty in articulating them" (2010: 282) and point to metaphor as a valuable strategy of describing these experiences to others as well as an element of therapeutic intervention. What is more, apart from metaphors in the Lakoffian sense, they emphasize the role of narratives in realizing one's sense of self or identity, as such an identity is dependent on the stories we tell of ourselves (2010: 285). By using image schema theory and cognitive approaches to deixis in discourse, Knapton (2016) investigated conceptualizations of threat in interviews with individuals

suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder. She observed that their recounts of episodes were structured by the SOURCE–PATH–GOAL image schema and the CONTAINER image schema.

Metaphorical realizations of mental disorders were also found in visual data. For example, Fahlenbrach (2017) examined audiovisual data with the objective to compare metaphors and metonymies of depression in informative videos published on YouTube with those in the artistically shaped opener of the movie *Melancholia* by Lars von Trier. She concluded that while both genres generate similar audiovisual metaphors of depression, i.e. DEPRESSION IS A DARK SPACE/TOWN/ANIMAL/SHADOW, DEPRESSION IS A HEAVY FORCE/ANIMAL, DEPRESSION IS FALLING DOWN, DEPRESSION IS SHRINKING, DEPRESSION IS LACK OF MOVEMENT, DEPRESSION IS SLOW MOVEMENT, the cinematic example builds a much more complex metaphorical picture. Forceville/Paling (2018), on the other hand, focused on short, wordless animation films depicting depression and observed that these films feature two dominant metaphors: DEPRESSION IS A DARK MONSTER and DEPRESSION IS A DARK CONFINING SPACE. As we can see, visual depiction of depression conforms to its verbal realizations. Finally, Saji/Venkatesan (2022) looked at graphic memoirs depicting personal narratives of mental illness experience in the context of graphic medicine.

Instead of studying interviews with patients or records of their communication with therapists, this paper presents an analysis of an animated series. The reason why we found the series *Steven Universe* interesting is that it depicts characters with deep-seated personality issues or even mental illnesses, complex relationships, as well as raw emotional moments, such as crying and arguments, in a way that is coherent to its target audience, i.e. children and teenagers. Yet, because the difficult content is conveyed via a narrative realized in a fictional world and by not-exactly-human characters, the message is indirect, and the interpretation depends on a viewer's personal cognitive environment. This indirectness is enhanced by the use of conceptual metaphors which, however, also make sense if read literally. In other words, one viewer may enjoy the series as a form of entertainment, focusing on the plot, while another may discover a layer relevant for dealing with their own traumas. In such a case, the series might be seen as a form of self-help resource providing an inspiration for finding possible solutions (for an analysis of how different conceptualizations of the self can impact an individual's mindset and physical performance, see: Drogosz 2023).

## 3. *Steven Universe*: Synopsis and values

It is not easy to outline the plot of the series, as it is complex and abounds in detail, so we will only give the gist here, and provide more detailed explanations subsequently when they are relevant to the analysis. *Steven Universe*, created by Rebecca Sugar and aired on Cartoon Network from November 2013 to January 2019, is about the eponymous thirteen-year-old boy who was born of a human father and a Gem mother. In this series, Gems are an extra-terrestrial race with indefinite lifespans that arrived on Earth approximately at the dawn of mankind. They are capable of supernatural feats, such as shapeshifting, summoning objects or projecting humanoid forms. It is in the form of humanoid females that we see them in the series. The most important Gems are Pearl, Garnet, and Amethyst who take care of Steven and over time they all develop their own unique family mechanics.

The main theme of the series is Steven's process of self-development and self-understanding. Over the course of 160 episodes, we see Steven engage in different activities ranging from quite simple pastimes like having fun on the beach with his father or his best friend to missions of fighting monsters in the company of other Gems. Sometimes in funny and sometimes in painful ways he discovers both his powers and his weaknesses, finds out more about himself and others, and becomes an increasingly complex individual. This human ability to grow, change, and learn from experience is in strong contrast to Gems who are told to fulfil one role from their first conscious moment. This fascinated Pink Quartz, Steven's mother, who decided that she wants to become a part of this beautiful process by having a baby.

*Steven Universe* is an adventure fantasy aimed predominantly to entertain, however, due to its narrative richness viewers are exposed to a vast range of characters who interact with each other in complex ways. The fact that most of the characters are alien beings with supernatural powers actually increases the show's potential to address difficult psychological and social issues in an indirect way.

## 4. Depiction of personality issues

Let us begin with an analysis of personality dysfunctions displayed by one character, namely Amethyst. As we watch the series and know her better, we realize that Amethyst's issues stem from her insecurity and inability to accept herself, the condition which on the one hand is rooted in her childhood, and on the other,

is exacerbated by the way other characters treat her. The episode "On the Run" (S01E40) depicts a dreary kindergarten, which is essentially a mine where Gems are born. The process involves injecting the planet with giant syringes, which resemble bacteriophages both superficially and in function. The nearby land is stripped of all life to allow Gems to grow. Eventually, when enough kindergartens are created, planets end up completely barren. Since this location is Amethyst's origin, it results in her perceiving herself as a "parasite" and a "bad Gem", as she exclaims during the episode. The conceptualization of herself (and all Gems) as parasites seems to be the foundation of her anxieties and sense of guilt. This episode also employs the BAD IS DARK metaphor to emphasize the area's wrongness, which is visible when Amethyst and Steven cross the border of the regular, colourful world and enter the darkness.

Amethyst's ways of coping with her apparent self-hatred include shapeshifting. She enjoys taking on different forms at every opportunity, often turning into animals and objects to complement a pun or to tease someone. Most notably, in "Tiger Millionaire" (S02E09), she assumes her alter-ego form known as the Purple Puma and participates in underground wrestling competitions. Near the end of the episode, Steven compares her antics to a wild cat looking for a place to be free:

> WAIT! I want to tell you Purple Puma's backstory. He was the wildest cat in the jungle, so wild, the other cats couldn't take it. So she, I mean he, went to look for somewhere he fit in, somewhere with other people who felt misunderstood. […] That's why we're all here. To be wild and free, and body slam each other, and wear cool costumes, and make up nicknames and uh... so can't we just have this? Can't we just wrestle?

The metaphor AMETHYST IS A WILD CAT is Steven's way of explaining Amethyst's behaviour to Garnet and Pearl. Taking on a different identity allows her to stop worrying about how she is perceived by the other Gems, as she believes that they view her negatively. Thus, she can at once separate herself from the "bad" version of herself and become more like the person she wants to be. By keeping her outings a secret, she ensures that she will be surrounded by people who only get to see her best qualities, the ones she wants to be recognized for. In other words, two metaphors are applicable to Amethyst: FREEDOM IS SHAPESHIFTING and BEING YOURSELF IS BEING TRAPPED. Steven sums up this behaviour in "Crack the Whip" (S03E18): "Sorry, Sadie. That's just Amethyst being Amethyst... *by not being Amethyst*".

More evidence for the metaphor BEING YOURSELF IS BEING TRAPPED can be found in "Reformed" (S02E5), during which Amethyst is frequently "poofed", i.e. her physical form is destabilized, forcing her to return inside her gem and reform.

Each time, she rushes through this process, even though she is encouraged to take her time and think about what she wants to be like. The show utilizes the metaphor INSECURITIES ARE PHYSICAL FLAWS to portray the issues resulting from this mindset and at the same time taking advantage of the genre of an animated series to visualize how one is looking for one's identity. The first shape she takes on simply substitutes her hands for feet, but the following two reflect her insecurities. Garnet tells her to be more like Pearl, that is, more serious and responsible. Instead, Amethyst deflects the meaning of her words by turning into a form intended to parody Pearl. Later on, as Amethyst gets offended at the implication that she is weak, which is a sore spot for her, she assumes an unsustainable form incorporating a giant, muscular arm and leg. These events finally prompt Steven to exclaim that "she doesn't want to think about herself!", a truth that at first surprises Amethyst. For the first time, she decides to break the habit and spend some time considering who she wants to be. Her resulting form ends up very similar to her initial one but is met with great joy from Pearl and Garnet, as they realized that she successfully confronted her insecurities.

The episode "Too Far" (S02E21) involves a metaphor concerning physical disability: A DISABLED PERSON IS A DEFECTIVE GEM. During this episode, Amethyst learns a truth about herself that explains many of her insecurities, especially those centred around being weak. Peridot, who is a certified kindergartener, i.e. a person who oversees Gem mining zones, delineates the flaws present in Amethyst and how she deviates from the regular Gems of her kind. The show even coins the term "gemetically" which blends the words 'gem' and 'gene' to refer to an 'inborn' disability in the Gem context:

> Peridot: You're the only Crystal Gem, that's actually a Gem!
> Amethyst: Uhm... What?
> Peridot: You outrank everyone on your team. They should be listening to you! You're a strong, singular, fully-functional soldier, despite the fact you're defective.
> Amethyst: Defective?
> Peridot: Well, sure! You're small! [...]
> Amethyst: What was I supposed to look like?
> Peridot: Well, you're a quartz. They're huge, loyal soldiers. You should be twice your size. Broad shouldered, intimidating. But you simply stayed in the ground too long.
> Amethyst: Are you saying I'm wrong?!
> Peridot: Gemetically speaking, yes. When you think about it it's all so... funny! [...] Hey, soldier. Maybe you can help me get this hunk of drill off. See, look at that! You can do everything a normal quartz can do.

The use of this metaphor plays a key role in this episode, as it facilitates the discussion about disabled people without touching on the subject directly. It helps explain the topic to those audience members who had limited or no contact with the handicapped and tries to draw their empathy by using a cartoon character they are already familiar with. On the other hand, the message is not as straightforward as to hurt people with disabilities, who might feel uncomfortable if the topic is breached directly, and at the same time gives them an opportunity to relate to Amethyst.

The episode "Maximum Capacity" (S01E43) addresses the issue of past painful memories using the metaphor EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE IS CLUTTER. On the literal level, the plot revolves around the task of cleaning out Greg's shed; however, on the metaphorical level it is about the troubled past that Greg, i.e. Steven's dad, and Amethyst share. Initially, Amethyst who is to help Greg in the task, opts to keep all his stuff without throwing anything out. The situation becomes serious when the two find tapes containing an old show they used to obsessively watch together. The old habit is revived to the detriment of Greg's relationship with his son, as he ends up missing out on spending time with him. Once he realizes this, Amethyst tries to guilt him into staying by reminding him that he is the reason why she no longer has Rose to support her. Steven then enters the scene and surmises the premise in the following words: "I get it. It's hard to deal with stuff from the past. You want to put it off because there's tons of it and it's heavy and it means a lot to you, so it's hard to let anything go. But you got to. Because this thing is full!".

This metaphor utilizes the medium of animation to conceptualize memory and memories. On the one hand, the audience gets to see the shed itself and the individual items in the collection that stand for all the random events and memories a person makes during their lifetime. On the other hand, Steven then puts the idea into words, further emphasizing the point of the episode. The verbal and the visual aspects of the cartoon complement each other to prompt specific inferences in the viewer. The end of the episode depicts a newly emptied out, clean shed as Amethyst and Greg are finally able to put their past behind them and reconcile. She hands him a framed photograph of Rose and Greg together, the one item from the shed that is worth keeping. Table 1. lists the potential mappings of the discussed metaphor:

The character of Amethyst is also a good example of how comparison to other people can affect one's self-perception as well as how such emotional states can be visually signalled. After facing Jasper in "Crack the Whip" (S03E18), Amethyst's morale hit an all-time low. Jasper stands for everything that Amethyst should have been. Even though Jasper's kindergarten had much worse conditions than Amethyst's, the former is a perfect Gem soldier – tall, muscular and fearsome.

Table 1. Mappings in the metaphor EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE IS CLUTTER

| Source Domain: CLUTTER | Target Domain: EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE |
|---|---|
| Shed | The mind |
| A full shed | An overloaded mind |
| Stuff | Memories |
| Junk | Past mistakes |
| Tons of stuff | A staggering number of mistakes |
| Heavy stuff | Memories that are difficult to cope with and re-evaluate |
| Important stuff | Cherished memories |
| Throwing stuff away | Letting go of the past/forgiving yourself |

In contrast, Amethyst was provided all the perfect conditions before she emerged, and yet she "stayed in the ground too long", as described by Peridot in "Too Far" (02E21). These circumstances can be transposed onto the human experience, with the kindergartens being a metaphor for neighbourhoods in which children are raised, and the holes from which Gems emerge being wombs. Jasper is like a healthy person born with predispositions to be fit and strong, but who was then forced to survive in a harsh environment, as opposed to Amethyst who, while born privileged, must deal with physical impairments. As far as visual aspects are concerned, there is a noticeable change in Amethyst's hair throughout these two episodes. Before Jasper appears in "Crack the Whip", Amethyst is having a good time, and her happy-go-lucky attitude is reflected in how her fringe does not cover her face. However, her face becomes steadily obscured when Jasper begins to berate her and makes her self-conscious. When she comes back after being poofed, her hair appears messier, and her fringe is constantly covering half her face. This functions as a visual metaphor intended to convey Amethyst's state of mind – the more she is reminded of her insecurities, the more she wants to hide herself from the world, because deep down she is ashamed of herself and no longer feels comfortable opening herself up to others. This is also mirrored in the way her gem is always partially covered by her clothes, only to become fully revealed in the final episode of the series, once she has enough confidence to embrace who she is. In this sense, the gem metonymically stands for the whole person.

The metaphors used to describe some of Amethyst's problems can help the younger audience to better cope with their own problems. Because these metaphors conceptualize elusive emotional states as physical and thus visible aspects of appearance, and memories as physical and thus tangible objects (i.e. clutter), they imply that a person can have some control over their personality and memory. This is

particularly true of the metaphor of the cluttered shed: the visual representation of memories as clutter makes the process of selecting memories feasible, and the sight of the clean, empty shed makes it worthwhile by appealing to the sense of aesthetics.

There are many other characters who represent various personality issues and challenges that life may pose. There is Pearl, who represents a person who sacrificed a lot in the past, who lost a loved one, who took a duty and the legacy of the dead one. While for Amethyst shapeshifting was a way to freedom, for Pearl it is a reminder of her past traumas, which is why she refuses to shapeshift. Thus, in her context, shapeshifting becomes a metaphor for psychological triggers. There is Peridot, who can represent an autistic person. Her difficulty to communicate with others when she misunderstands figurative language and all her lack of understanding of everyday situations so simple for others can be summarized in a metaphorical conceptualization AN AUTISTIC PERSON IS AN ALIEN. There is Lapis Lazuli as a person struggling from depression. Presentation of this character recruited the metaphors DEPRESSION IS A TRAP, DEPRESSION IS AN OCEAN, and DEPRESSION IS A MONSTER. The fact that this character is a blue gem connects to the conventional association of this colour with sadness and depression. Finally, there is Steven himself, who can stand for a young person coping without a mother, trying to find his own identity, discovering his skills, developing his potential and, ultimately, finding his life purpose.

## 5. Depiction of dysfunctional relationships

We believe that the metaphor A RELATIONSHIP IS A FUSION OF TWO PEOPLE is fundamental both for the show's plot formation and for depicting relationships, especially dysfunctional relationships. Again, the potential of the visual medium becomes very useful for both purposes. The ability to fuse, i.e. to combine their physical form to the effect of creating a new, stronger being, is inherent to every Gem. Numerous fusions appear in the show, but we decided to focus on Malachite, a fusion of Jasper and Lapis, possibly the most dysfunctional fusion in the show. Her reason for existence is built on shaky foundations, being established as to overpower a common enemy rather than out of care for each other. This readily contrasts with Garnet, who is described as an embodiment of a perfect relationship. Their differences can even be inferred from their basic designs: the monstrous and inhuman appearance of Malachite contrasts with the much more humanlike form of Garnet.

Malachite first comes into being in "Jail Break" (S01E52). Jasper goads Lapis to fuse with her by reminding her of all the awful experiences she had on Earth, many of which were at the hands of the Crystal Gems. This dysfunctional foundation leads to the spawning of a grotesque being in possession of four eyes and six arms, four of which she uses as legs, creating a twisted, centauresque Gem known as Malachite. It turns out that Lapis's idea of revenge was quite different from Jasper's, as she decides to take out her anger specifically on Jasper instead of the other characters, imprisoning her at the bottom of the ocean. It will be quite some time before the two are released from this self-inflicted punishment and become separate individuals again, but the aftermath of the fusion eventually becomes transparent. For instance, Lapis acquires a dislike of water, her once-loved element, a problem similar to avoiding an activity one used to enjoy with a partner, especially if it resulted in making some terrible memories. Steven hopes to overcome her anxiety by inviting her on a boat ride in "Alone at Sea" (S03E14); however, she cannot help but be reminded of her troubled relationship with Jasper over the course of the episode. What is more, she also reveals a deep-seated fear of being a terrible, controlling person, when she violently refuses to act as the ship's captain exclaiming that she should not be put in charge. The memory of trapping Jasper haunts her.

The fishing context in "Alone at Sea" allows to enrich the picture of abusive relationships mechanics by another conceptual metaphor: AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP IS FISHING. The same way a fish is lured by bait, an abuser attracts their victim with a desirable quality. In the case of Malachite, Jasper is ensnared by the concept of being more powerful together, while Lapis is captivated by the idea of being able to dominate the other Gem, quite likely because it feels like the only measure of control she has ever felt in her life. In other words, both Gems use the fusion as a way to cope with their inability to deal with life and, as such, it is an extremely flawed foundation to build their relationship on. In the same episode, when Greg hands Lapis the fishing rod, she immediately hooks an enormous fish and, despite the best efforts of the three, the line snaps and the creature escapes their grasp. Just before this happens, Lapis begins to suspect that she was not reeling in a fish, but in fact, Jasper. The show blurs the boundary between what is real and what is metaphorical to give the viewer insight into what is happening in Lapis's mind – even activities that seem far-removed from her foregone relationship can still remind her of those past events. The fish pulling hard on the line maps onto her longing to be with Jasper again, despite the self-destructive nature of this desire. In the same way, Jasper is desperate to become Malachite again, despite the horrible treatment she suffered from Lapis. This gives the audience a worrying glimpse

into the mind of an abuse victim, who constantly keeps returning to their abuser as if it was an addiction, craving for those few moments of validation to be found in between the mistreatment.

It is worth noting that in the case of Malachite, Lapis and Jasper each filled the role of both abuser and victim – the line is intentionally unclear so that the blame cannot be placed on just one person. One might be tempted to pin the blame on Jasper in view of her aggressive and pushy attitude, but both her and Lapis understand that the blue Gem is not without her own faults. Additionally, Jasper not having any previous experience with fusion leads her to believe that Malachite is the only type of fusion there is, which mirrors how an abuse victim does not realize that abuse is not an inherent part of a relationship. This in turn makes it impossible to fully villainize her, considering that perhaps with the right upbringing or guidance, she would have been able to recognize the flaws in the relationship.

The conceptualization of a relationship as a fusion of two individuals offers interesting inferences. Most importantly, because a relationship represented as merging two individuals into one being has a visual realization, its form and appearance can reflect the nature of that relationship: if a relationship is toxic, the result is a monstrous creature (Malachite); if a relationship is healthy and harmonious, then the fused form is powerful and attractive (Garnet).

Furthermore, the monstrous being, just like an abusive relationship, can only bring permanent suffering and struggle to the individuals involved. The suffering will continue as long as the fusion/relationship is maintained, and only breaking the fusion and separating the individuals can help. The metaphor of fusion clearly explains why an abusive relationship is so difficult to break, and why attempts to heal such relationships are usually futile.

## 6. Corruption as a way to depict emotional traumas

Before we show its significance in presenting emotional traumas, a short explanation of corruption is needed. To end the Gem rebellion on Earth, the Diamonds assaulted the planet with corrupting light, which damaged the forms of every Gem it reached. This process, known as corruption, prevents them from assuming their regular forms and instead warps them into horrid abominations. These creatures have significant battle prowess and wreak havoc, forcing the Crystal Gems to hunt down and defeat them; however, the series shows that the Crystal Gems are not very effective in dealing with the corruption itself. All they could do was to “bubble”

corrupted Gems, that is, to keep them in suspended animation, which relived them of suffering but also robbed them of the enjoyment of life. In a sense, this is reminiscent of overly medicated trauma survivors, who can function at a basic level but mentally and emotionally are so numbed that they cannot fully experience life. Initially, the issue of corruption turns out to be too difficult for Steven to fix on his own, but eventually his determination enables him to find a solution – one that necessitates facing the Diamonds as the cause of the trauma as well as requiring their cooperation.

Many episode plots involve corrupted Gems, but the most frequently reoccurring one is Nephrite, nicknamed Centipeetle due to her corrupted form blending aspects of two insects (centipedes and beetles). Nephrite was deeply affected by the Gem war as well as the corrupting light. Her experience maps with that of a war veteran experiencing PTSD, giving rise to the CORRUPTION IS PTSD metaphor. The viewer is initially unaware of her history, as she is at first stuck in her monster form, which is incapable of speech. She appears in the show's first episode, where she functions as an antagonist. She has the form of a giant, acid-spitting bug and in combat she is able to best all three of the Crystal Gems combined. Fortunately, Steven manages to defeat her with an electric discharge and until "Monster Buddies" (S01E23), she remains bubbled in his home's basement. Later in the same episode, Steven accidentally frees her, which leads to an interesting sequence as Nephrite attempts to reform. She tries to take on a humanoid shape at first, but it is quickly overpowered by her insectoid form. Noticing Steven's distress, however, she makes an effort to reduce her own size, becoming a miniature version of the Centipeetle. She makes it apparent that she does not wish to harm him, indicating that her bestial transformation is something she herself is fighting against, analogically to how one can hold back the effects of trauma to avoid becoming an emotional burden to those around them.

While the Crystal Gems seem unable to see in her anything but a monster, Steven recognizes her fear and uncertainty and expresses his desire to assist her. He attempts to build a bond of trust between him and the corrupted Gem instead of openly displaying aggression towards her, as Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl tend to do. This involves sharing some chips with her, a favour that Centipeetle returns by protecting him from a seagull. She even joins the Crystal Gems on an adventure when her acid spit proves to be a valuable asset. In the end, however, her monstrous form turns out to be too volatile, as the sight of Garnet's gauntlets makes her panic, similar to PTSD patients having various triggers reminding them of their traumatic experiences.

The story continues much later, in "Monster Reunion" (S03E14), after Steven's healing powers grow stronger. His first thought is to help his old friend Centipeetle and the group goes downstairs to un-bubble her. Steven does what he can and, as a result, partially and temporarily takes the Gem out from her corrupted state but cannot fully overcome the severe damage done to her. The episode elaborates on the concept of corruption as PTSD caused by a terrifying event and on Centipeetle's status as a war veteran. Since Steven fails to cure her with his powers, but still manages to stabilize her in a semi-human form, he attempts to figure out a different way to help her. While trying to learn more about the reason behind her corruption, Steven puts effort into adjusting his phrasing to avoid saying things that could upset her, in parallel to a therapist engaging their client. Although Centipeetle's memory of past events is incomplete, certain triggers can bring them out. Steven takes advantage of this by opening a bag of chips which they shared in an earlier episode, then later manages to help her recall the Diamonds by attempting to perform their official salute. When Centipeetle attempts to communicate the source of her trauma, i.e. the strange song-like signal sent by the Diamonds to corrupt all the Gems on Earth, she reverts to her corrupted state, similar to how recalling a traumatic event can be agonizing to a traumatized individual, resulting in a breakdown and cancelling any current progress. The further she loses herself to the pain, the more monstrous she becomes, which functions as a visual representation of her inner anguish.

As she fails to communicate with Steven, Centipeetle becomes increasingly agitated and decides to take matters into her own hands – she uses the warp in his house to teleport into the vicinity of her old spaceship. Her mounting desperation culminates once she returns to her fully corrupted state and begins slamming her monstrous limb against the ship's hand scanner in a futile attempt to activate it. Once Steven helps her open it, she finally finds solace in being reunited with her former crewmates, who are similarly corrupted, thus allowing them to be a comfort to each other. Once the Crystal Gems realize that Steven's approach to Centipeetle was far more successful than their strategy of dealing with corrupted Gems, they allow the poor Gems to remain together, in a ship that, in Garnet's words, is their bubble, a safe space for the insectoid creatures.

The metaphorical correspondences between corruption and PTSD, and their visual representation in the form of a monster, make it possible to show the nature of this psychological condition. The little control Centipeetle has over her form and aggressive instincts mirrors the little control that PTSD victims have over their often-aggressive reactions. The metaphor and the way in which the corrupted

characters function in the show's plot can help to understand the emotions of despair, helplessness, self-loathing, but also hatred towards those who are responsible for the agony experienced by PTSD victims.

## 7. Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to investigate how the metaphors used in the series *Steven Universe* addressed sensitive topics such as personality disorders, abusive relationships, and stress-related disorders. For example, the character of Amethyst showed that the metaphor of being a parasite can be used to describe someone's sense of inferiority, shapeshifting was a way to depict one's coping with self-hatred and adopting different personas, and decluttering the shed represented dealing with unwanted and problematic memories. Further, we argued that the fusion of two characters into a new, monstrous individual (e.g. Malachite) portrays a toxic relationship, and that Centipeetle, a product of corruption, can represent a person suffering from PTSD.

We also wanted to compare the metaphors used in the context of therapy or counselling with those we had identified in *Steven Universe*. We found some interesting similarities. The metaphor often attested in therapeutic discourse was the conceptualization of the self as a container and the use of the concept of the container to express some form of restriction. In the show, we see its realization in the conceptualization of being oneself as being trapped, with one's personality corresponding to a container. Next, both therapists and patients described depression as a descent or a captor. The same domains were activated in the scene where Lapis fused with Jasper was imprisoned at the bottom of the ocean. Darkness was also commonly associated with depression and generally negative emotions, both in the therapeutic discourse and in the show: recall the dark colours used to depict Amethyst's kindergarten as the source of her emotional anguish. Finally, there was the concept of the monster, which was sometimes used to describe depression, and which was also employed in the show to depict an abusive relationship and a PTSD victim. However, the appeal of the show is not that it uses conventional metaphors, but that it creates its own, novel metaphors, such as shapeshifting, fusion, and corruption.

We believe that the visual modality, narrative, and metaphor give the show a potential therapeutic effect for a number of reasons. Firstly, according to the principle that seeing is believing, the visual modality affords a presentation of all

these sensitive topics in a way that makes them more real to the viewer: changing personas is changing between different body shapes, a close relationship is the actual fusion of two individuals into a new one, toxicity of a relationship is manifested as a monstrosity, impacts of traumas are physically visible, and so on. The power of the visual modality turns all those states that are private and mental into entities or qualities which are public and physical. Thus, not only is comprehension easier, but a chance of finding a solution becomes more realistic as well: removing old clutter from a shed is easier, after all, than dealing with some difficult memories. Secondly, because all those sensitive topics are embedded in the narrative, viewers may be encouraged to activate the conventional metaphor LIFE IS A STORY and start seeing their own lives as narratives with a plot, unexpected events, obstacles, and challenges to test protagonists. What is more, because the characters of the series show spectacular resilience and adaptability, viewers who find or create isomorphisms between their own experience and that of the characters' may also project some of these features onto themselves. Finally, the show's fantastic world can itself become a source domain for metaphorizing someone's life and, in this way, become a trigger for making sense of one's situation in a new, meaningful way or reframing one's self-perception to find hitherto invisible perspectives, which is exactly what some counsellors hope to achieve.

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