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# RESEARCH ARTICLES

# **Critique of *Mulan* as a Feminist Film**

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the contradicting feminist ideals in the 1998 Disney animated film *Mulan*, and how they may have been progressive upon release but now falls short in a modern light. It discusses how the film depicts a modern retelling of a classic Chinese story *The Ballad of Mulan*, with a plot in which a young Chinese woman takes her father's place in the dynasty's army during the 6<sup>th</sup> century and presents Mulan as the heroine. Using ideals of fourth wave feminism compared to third wave feminism which the movie was released during, it expresses that the plot seemingly does not match the overall purpose of the feminist story. Asserting that the values of Disney feminism hold low standards and use certain themes like gender stereotypes and negative views of women that go against the movie's purpose.

## Critique of Mulan as a Feminist Film

December 5, 2022

Disney's animated film, *Mulan*, depicted a modern retelling of a classic Chinese story *The Ballad of Mulan*. The film shows a young Chinese woman taking her father's place in the dynasty's army during the 6<sup>th</sup> century and presents Mulan as the heroine. Disney's attempt at a feminist film during third wave feminism was well accepted, but in today's perspective, viewers are reminded of the subtle themes that argue the film may have missed its mark. Regarding themes of feminism, the plot seemingly does not match the overall purpose of the story, and a reflection on Mulan's time in the army shows how the cartoon reinforces the gender stereotypes of both men and women. Although there are aspects within the film that promote female empowerment, there are underlying themes in the script which contradict this notion.

Before continuing I would like to issue praise for *Mulan*, as I considered it to be one of my favorite Disney princess movies as a child even though she technically held no crown. It was important for me to be able to relate to and recognize other characters that did not resemble me or my situation. Any claim I make is with insight of feminist movements that followed the film release that may have supported the idea of it being a true feminist film. A current term circling current feminist vernacular is known as *intersectionality*, which describes the way systems of inequality such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc. intersect to create unique ways of experiencing gender.<sup>1</sup> This new term aids the claim of *Mulan* as a feminist film seeing as it focuses on an Asian princess, who experiences both feminine and masculine roles throughout the film. The fact that *Mulan* highlights this aspect of gender marks an agreement of the progressive nature of the film, but still falls short in other areas.

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<sup>1</sup> What is intersectionality? (n.d.). <https://www.intersectionaljustice.org/what-is-intersectionality>

Mulan's release date in 1998 was set during the third wave of feminism and was meant to reflect the foundations of said wave.<sup>2</sup> This third wave is described to have the intent "to create conditions of freedom, equality, justice, and self-actualization for all people by focusing on gender-related issues in particular ..."<sup>3</sup> Without a deeper look some might agree that *Mulan* writes a story that does just that, a young girl defies the norms of society while being empowered, articulate, and high achieving. However, one might only be able to compare the film's progressiveness to the inherently low bar set by the Disney princess franchise. Zara Brownless, an entrepreneurial filmmaker, explained this concept in a TedTalk revealing the underlying sexism within the Disney princess films. Her talk addressed several issues within the franchises and even marketing of the films, but one specific aspect of her topic was talking about the unrealistic proportions of the princesses and a so-called "babyface overgeneralization effect."<sup>4</sup> Brownless claims that all princess characters have the same generalized face "Large wide set eyes, high eyebrows, big forehead, shrunken nose, shrunken chin." along with "eyes bigger than their wrists."<sup>5</sup> After realizing this pattern, it is hard to unsee it within these films, especially since Mulan's character did not skip this dynamic. Even in male disguise Mulan's figure matches this description, despite her other attempts to appear "masculine." Producers managed to introduce young girls to racial and ethnic diversity by introducing Mulan as the first Asian princess but continued to use the copy-and-paste body type and beauty standards.

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<sup>2</sup> Zhuoyi Wang, "From Mulan (1998) to Mulan (2020): Disney Conventions, Cross-Cultural Feminist Intervention, and a Compromised Progress," *Arts* 11, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>3</sup> R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no.1 (2008), 192.

<sup>4</sup> Zara Brownless, *The Power and Problem of Princesses* (TEDxUniversityofEdinburgh, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Zara Brownless, *The Power and Problem of Princesses* (TEDxUniversityofEdinburgh, 2018).



Although the storyline may follow a more self-aware and independent young lady than seen previously in the franchise, several of the themes still exist.

Stepping away from the portrayal of her figure, it is almost impossible for viewers to miss the overwhelming number of male roles in this film as well. Now, this could be attributed to the plot, but a true test of a feminist film would be if it passes the Bechdel test. This test originated in 1985 and posed three simple questions: Are there at least two female characters? Do they hold a conversation? And does that conversation revolve around something other than Men?<sup>6</sup> A simple once-over watch of the film would prove that, regarding *Mulan* (1998), all the answers to the test's questions are *no*. Like other Disney films, viewers are exposed to a predominately male cast that holds the majority of the speaking roles. In *Mulan* alone, men were found to have over 77 percent of the lines in a film that presents one of the first leading heroines.<sup>7</sup> The storyline shows Mulan's character entering the male-dominated military where her only friends are men. Even Mushu, the sidekick companion given to her by the producers is a male dragon, prompted by the story that her ancestors thought she was too clumsy to be successful on her own.<sup>8</sup> A female companion would have added complexity to the film that had been absent in other parts of the franchise and matched the feminist wave of the time. However, the writers made it difficult to have any dynamic female relationships when all the other female characters are left behind within the first 15 minutes of the film. Although she does so to support

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<sup>6</sup> Scott Selisker, "The Bechdel Test and Social Form of Character Networks" *New Literary History* 46, no. 3 (2015), 505.

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Guo, "Females Are Disney's Stars, but Guys Talk a Lot, Pair Find", *The Washington Post*, last modified February 2, 2016. <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2016/feb/02/females-are-disney-s-stars-but-guys-tal/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Mulan*. United States: Buena Vista Pictures, 1998.

her family and discover herself, Mulan acquires her power through training by men meant for men.

*Mulan* also promotes several gender stereotypes as the character attempts to disguise herself among other army men. In *The Ballad of Mulan*, the story on which the film is based, the only discussion of gender is near the end of the story when it is revealed that Mulan is a woman, and no one knew.<sup>9</sup> It goes on to say, “Two hare’s[sic] running side by side close to the ground, how can they tell if I am he or she?”<sup>10</sup> implying that as in nature there is no difference between male and female when they are doing the same action. Disney’s adaptation does not follow this ideology and depicts distinct social expectations of what is male and female. The opening scenes present a song that describes the perfect wife, and because Mulan cannot fit this mold she is deemed as unworthy by the “matchmaker” who thinks she is too clumsy and clueless. When she speaks her mind and volunteers for her father’s place, she is told she is a dishonor to the family. As the army is marching across China there is also a musical sequence where the men express that their ideal woman is “paler than the moon” with “eyes that shine like stars.”<sup>11</sup> However, when Mulan offers the verse describing a girl who’s got a brain and always speaks her mind, she is met with a collective *Nah*, in response.

Mulan portrays men through common stereotypes as well once she “fails” at her duties as a woman and decides to disguise herself as a man based on what is socially portrayed as “masculine”. There is also a separate musical sequence dedicated to what a “man” should be as

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<sup>9</sup> Emily Nighman, “Orientalist Stereotypes and Transnational Feminisms in Disney’s 1998 and 2020 *Mulan*.” *Film Matters* 12, no. 3 (2021): 96–108.

<sup>10</sup> Han H. Frankel, *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). 68-72.

<sup>11</sup> *Mulan*. United States: Buena Vista Pictures, 1998.

well in “I’ll Make a Man Out of You.” One of the lyrics, “Did they send me daughters, when I asked for sons?”<sup>12</sup> Compares the weak and unstable army to being a group of girls, as if that is a bad thing. Continuing with the song he claims that they must be “swift as the coursing river, with all the force of a great typhoon, with all the strength of a raging fire.”<sup>13</sup> This verse stands in sharp contrast to the song about what is expected of a woman, but also presents men with unreasonable expectations that they must resemble the forces of nature. It furthers the concept that men must uphold a strong courageous character and cannot protect the nation if they show any signs of weakness or femininity.

Although *Mulan* is a groundbreaking Disney film when it comes to intersectionality and representation of Asian culture, it did little to correct gender-related issues of the time. It was easy to identify this film as inherently feminist as it was released during a time of changing feminist perspectives, but the old themes still exist for young viewers. After looking at the film with a more critical lens there are still sexist themes, few strong female characters, and continuation of gender stereotypes. This is not to say that the film should never be enjoyed, however, just looked at from a different light.

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<sup>12</sup> *Mulan*. United States: Buena Vista Pictures, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> *Mulan*. United States: Buena Vista Pictures, 1998.

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# **The Issue of Queer Representation in *Stranger Things* and the *It* Franchise**

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This essay analyzes and discusses the queer representation in film, specifically in the television show *Stranger Things* and the *It* (2017 & 2019) movie franchise. Though queer representation in media has undoubtedly undergone growth, it continues to need development and diversification. The primary aspects of evaluation included queer coding, queerbaiting, and the “killing your gays” trope. Each of these concepts is applied to *Stranger Things* and the *It* duology, with specific focus on characters victimized by these tropes. In-depth analysis found that queer coding, queerbaiting, and the “killing your gays” trope are overwhelmingly present in both works of reviewed popular media. This examination indicates the care in which larger-scale film productions must treat any attempt of queer representation, as there is a fine line between genuine recognition and celebration of queer culture and the harmful mistreatment of LGBTQ+ audiences through the use of stereotypes and tropes. Furthermore, this examination promotes further investigation into the stagnation of progress in LGBTQ+ representation within media and particularly within the film industry.

## The Issue of Queer Representation in *Stranger Things* and the *It* Franchise

In media and pop culture, representation of minorities has undergone incredible progress even in the past five years. Specifically, inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in modern film and television has seen noteworthy growth—from a same-sex couple raising a child in a Campbell's Soup commercial (Waxman), to an HBO Max television series that features a trans woman as the lead character, appropriately played by a trans woman actress, earning a staggering nine Emmys in its mere two seasons of runtime (“Euphoria”). The significance of this cannot be overstated, as Hollywood and other large budget film studios have long had a history of casting cisgender men and women to play transgendered characters. Still, despite these forward strides in contemporary film and media, queer representation has become something of a double-edged sword; certainly, larger-scale film productions must treat any attempt of queer representation with care, as there is a fine line between genuine recognition and celebration of queer culture and the harmful mistreatment of LGBTQ+ audiences through the use of stereotypes and tropes, such as queer coding, queerbaiting, the dreaded “bury your gays” trope.

These three devices are all interconnected to each other in their representation within queer media. Queer coding depicts the subtextual imagery and language used to indicate queer characters, and queerbaiting is the negative offshoot of this, wherein these queer-coded themes are hinted at but never explored or culminate in anything—generally, queerbaiting is a marketing tool for media sources to increase ratings and potentially draw in larger audiences. A further reach of this concept is the “bury your gays” trope, in which film directors or producers choose to kill off queer or queer coded characters either for shock value, or as a means to avoid social backlash for including said queer characters in the first place. Indeed, it speaks to the stagnation of progress in LGBTQ+ representation within media and particularly within the film industry



that each of these three devices are put into effect in the Netflix's hit-show *Stranger Things*, and Warner Bros. Pictures' production of *It* (2017) and *It Chapter Two* (2019).

*Stranger Things* has taken the world by storm. In 2018, before the release of Season 3, it won a Guinness World Record for being the most in-demand digital online series (Eggerton), while *Stranger Things* Season 4 is "Netflix's most popular English-language series ever and second most popular overall" (Hailu). Furthermore, Season 4 of *Stranger Things* cost Netflix an estimated \$30 million per episode, a massive leap from "Season 1's estimated budget of \$6 million per episode, Season 2's budget of \$8 million per episode, and Season 3's budget of less than \$10 million per episode" (George). Clearly, Season 4 was a new level of mainstream television—thus, it came as a shock to many fans within the LGBTQ+ community when this incredibly high-profile show continued to commit the egregious acts of queerbaiting and the "bury your gays" trope.

Similarly to *Stranger Things*, the *It* movies were something of a pop culture phenomenon, though the hype has worn off as the movies have aged. Still, *It* (2017) broke ten different box office records, including "Biggest Horror Movie Worldwide Gross" with just over \$700 million worldwide and "Biggest Horror Movie Opening Weekend" with \$123.4 million, ranking it as the 38th biggest opening weekend ever (Kennedy). *It Chapter Two* was also a box office success, "dominating over the competition with \$91 million in North America," according to *Variety* (Rubin). *It Chapter Two* fell short of first film's debut by 26%, a rather steep drop that can be attributed to factors such as it's almost three-hour runtime and the fact that it is a sequel. Also like *Stranger Things*, the *It* duology suffers from negative queer representations. These specific examples are just two among an entire plethora of movies, shows, books, and other forms of media that, whether intentionally or not, exploit LGBTQ+ ideas and people. This

exploitation is an issue that carries a strongly negative impact on queer audiences who attempt to parallel themselves to these characters, as well as cisgendered, heteronormative audiences who are likely to internalize these harmful, unrealistic media portrayals of queer communities and individuals.

### **Queer Coding**

It is important to note that queer coding is not inherently bad. The issue arises when queer coded characters are villainized, which can be harmful for LGBTQ+ individuals who see themselves in these characters. Queer coding is succinctly defined by Thomas Hubbard as “the practice of using coded language and imagery to represent queer characters or themes in media.” In contemporary film, queer coding can likely be traced back to the Motion Picture Production Code, more commonly known as the Hays Code; established in 1930, this code “gave producers specific guidelines on what they could and could not show on film” (Hunt). Furthermore, the Hays Code was enforced by the Production Code Administration (PCA), who compelled Hollywood to follow the rules regarding censorship in film. The PCA “fell under the umbrella of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), a large industry group that counted all major studio players as members” and the “MPPDA producers had to submit story ideas and scripts to the PCA for review, as well as the final prints of their films” (Hunt). If a film failed this review, it was prohibited from wide release, keeping it from being shown in mainstream movie theaters; a result that heavily influenced said film’s consumer profits.

Naturally, this heavy censorship in the motion picture industry led filmmakers to lean into the use of subtext to portray things that, at that time, were seen as provocative. Queer coding became a solution, a proverbial loophole that wasn’t without faults of its own. Because of the negative association of anything connected with classified as “deviant,” queer coded characters

were almost always portrayed in a negative light or punished for their deviance to the socially accepted norms. Though the Hays Code was replaced in 1968 by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system, its influence remains well into the 21st century. As noted by McInroy and Craig, “LGBTQ people have consistently been stereotyped as comic relief, villains and/or criminals, mentally and/or physically ill, and victims of violence.” As with any stereotype or generalization that attempts to encompass an entire demographic, these tropes are incredibly dangerous to the queer community in their damning labels, and these stereotypes are evident both in *Stranger Things* and the *It* franchise.

### *Stranger Things*

Set in the 1980s, *Stranger Things* has a single explicitly queer character. Robin Buckley, a funny yet incredibly intelligent teenage girl, is introduced in the show’s third season. Despite this, there are several other queer coded characters: namely, Billy Hargrove, Eddie Munson, and Will Byers. Billy Hargrove is the secondary antagonist in Season 2, then possessed by the primary antagonist (the Mind Flayer) in Season 3. He fits McInroy and Craig’s aforementioned tropes of villain, physical and mental illness in his possessed state, and is a victim of violence, as shown in the reveal of his abusive household near the end of Season 2, in which his father berates him and calls him a homophobic slur. Still, his queer coded nature is mostly seen within his interactions with fan-favorite character Steve Harrington. Several times over the course of Season 2, these characters have moments of intense sexual tension, which even Joe Keery (who played character Steve Harrington) admitted to having a “homoerotic sort of vibe” (Jung). Furthermore, Hargrove’s hyper-sexualization of other females—including an entire arc in Season 3 in which he openly flirts with a classmate’s mother—and his almost vain regard towards his appearance both point towards potentially queer stereotypes.

Newly introduced Eddie Munson, a character debuted in Season 4, also falls victim to homoeroticism with Harrington, an ironic event considering Harrington's status as the show's "token straight" and the queer-confirmed Buckley's best friend. Munson is on the run for almost the entirety of Season 4, wrongly accused of mass murder, earning him a criminal status. Even before this, he is a social pariah in the small-town setting, which, combined with his heavy queer coding, makes him an easy villain in the eyes of the townsfolk. He is a drug dealer, leads the *Dungeons & Dragons* club, and is subjected to verbal abuse from classmates. He and Hargrove are both queer coded in their wardrobe design: both have tattoos, wear excessive rings and necklaces, and have unconventionally long hair. Munson even carries a black and white bandana in his back pocket, which reflects the hanky code, a "covert sartorial code used predominately by queer men in the 1970s and into the 1980s" (Cornier).

Will Byers, one of the shows leads, checks almost every single stereotype listed by McInroy and Craig. He has been queer coded since the first episode of Season 1, in which his mother points out how the other kids his age "call him names, laugh at him, his clothes" and that his father Lonnie "always said he was queer" ("Chapter One..."), which indicates a rocky homelife for Byers prior to his parents' separation. Throughout the show, Byers is depicted as the ultimate victim. He goes missing for a week in Season 1, is tormented and subsequently possessed by the Mind Flayer in Season 2 (interestingly, the only other main character to be possessed besides Hargrove), becomes a quasi-comedic relief and is dismissed by his friends in Season 3, and is reduced to a pining, one-sided romance in Season 4. In addition to Byers' victimization, he is feminized by his physical weakness and his interest in art, is targeted by bullies for his perceived queerness, is heavily paralleled with the show's overarching and

recently revealed antagonist (Vecna, or Henry Creel), and, in Season 4, has several intimate scenes with his best friend and implied love interest Mike Wheeler.

### *It Franchise*

*It* and the cinematic sequel *It Chapter Two* follow the same cast of seven characters, from age thirteen in the first movie to age forty in the sequel. Based on the novel by Stephen King, these film adaptations deviate from their source material and place a more modern spin on the events of the book. Even so, the two primarily queer coded characters remain the same: Eddie Kaspbrak and Richie Tozier. Eddie Kaspbrak is a neurotic hypochondriac who has asthma. In *It*, at age thirteen, he is the shortest member of the group, is always seen with a fanny pack filled with medication, has meticulously styled hair, is perceived as fragile and physically weak, and has a turbulent relationship with his extremely overbearing mother. In *It Chapter Two*, at age forty, he continues to carry many of these traits, though he loses the fanny pack and gains a wife who is a carbon copy of his late mother—in fact, Kaspbrak’s mother in the first movie and his wife in the second movie are played by the same actress, and Kaspbrak’s single interaction with his wife in *It Chapter Two* indicate an unhappy marriage. Furthermore, the sequel begins with a hate crime where a gay couple is attacked, with one of the men paralleling Kaspbrak in stature, fiery attitude, and, most notably, his asthma.

Despite having a tight-knit friend group, in both movies Kaspbrak is seen to be closest with Richie Tozier, exchanging jokes, bantering, and seemingly attached at the hip. In *It*, at age thirteen, Richie Tozier is the group’s comic relief character who hides his insecurities behind jokes. He has absent parents, is most often seen wearing flamboyant Hawaiian shirts, and has a strong sense of protectiveness over Kaspbrak. Despite his constant antagonizing of Kaspbrak, Tozier is almost always seen to be reaching for Kaspbrak in moments of danger. In *It Chapter*

*Two*, Tozier remains very close with Kaspbrak. Despite being a successful standup comedian, the only comedy set actually shown on-screen is Tozier making a hypersexual joke about a girlfriend that the movie clearly shows he does not have. He is mocked by Pennywise, the franchise's infamous villain, for having a "dirty little secret," is notably the most distraught over Kaspbrak's untimely death, and at the end of the movie, he is seen re-carving his and Kaspbrak's initials into the Kissing Bridge, as he'd apparently done when they were kids.

### **Queerbaiting**

Queerbaiting is the practice of using queer coded language and imagery with the specific purpose of attracting queer audiences, without providing actual representation or payoff. Indeed, the relationship between queer coding and queerbaiting is complicated. As Hubbard points out, queer coding "can be seen as a way of subverting the heteronormative coding of mainstream media, thus making media more accessible to queer audiences," while queerbaiting "can be seen as a way of exploiting queer audiences for the sake of marketing and ratings." Queerbaiting can be used "as a tactic to lure queer audiences whilst ensuring that heterosexist audiences are not alienated by queer content" or alternatively "as an attempt to market to the LGBTQ community and allies" (Woods and Hardman). While these methods may push media further into the spotlight or increase ratings, queerbaiting negatively impacts queer audiences and, in many cases, the "queerbait" characters themselves, whose entire personalities are expected to revolve around their queerness.

### *Stranger Things*

With all the excitement stirring up prior to Season 4's release, "the discussion of Will's sexuality spread like wildfire online, leading to the writers of the show to confirm in several interviews that they will address Will's sexuality in Season 4" and "even the actors in pre-season

interviews were heavily implying that Will was gay” (Gardener). All of this hype subsequently led to “several articles being published claiming that Will’s sexuality would be addressed in the upcoming fourth season” (Gardener), which never actually came to fruition. Despite all the subtext and assurances from the cast, writers, and promotional teams, there is no payoff, a fact that had many LGBTQ+ fans outraged.

In Season 4, rather than having his sexuality addressed, Byers is shown recoiling from the advances of a girl, doing a school presentation over Alan Turing (a famous World War II mathematician who was persecuted for being gay), and has many coded conversations with Mike Wheeler, his best friend and presumed love interest. Byers is thrust into a love triangle between his best friend, Wheeler, and his adoptive sister, Eleven, two characters who are already in a (notably unhealthy) relationship. Byers makes Wheeler a painting of them and their friends as their D&D characters in battle, even going as far as to paint a heart on Wheeler’s shield. Upon gifting him the painting, Byers proceeds to give an emotional, teary-eyed coded confession using Eleven as a shield of his own:

“These past few months she’s been so lost without you. It’s just, she’s so different from other people, and when you’re different, sometimes...you feel like a mistake. But you make her feel like she’s not a mistake at all. Like she’s better for being different. And that gives her the courage to fight on. If she was mean to you or she seemed like she was pushing you away, it’s probably just because she’s scared of losing you, just like you’re scared of losing her. And if she was going to lose you, I think she’d rather just get it over with quick, like ripping off a Band-Aid. So, yeah. El needs you, Mike. And she always will” (“Chapter Eight...”).

Throughout Season 4, Byers is reduced to hopelessly pining. He is almost constantly miserable, and there is very minimal payoff for his endeavors. As Gardener points out, “the writers use queer suffering as not only a plot point for Will’s character arc this season but have also demoted Will to relationship counsellor for a heterosexual relationship,” and that Will has become nothing more than a plot device. The closest he gets to a proper coming out scene is a coded conversation where his older brother, Jonathan, promises his support while talking around the actual subject. While the creators and cast of *Stranger Things* have verified that Byers is gay in post-release interviews, there was no substantial payoff to the four seasons worth of buildup within the show itself. The lack of on-screen representation doesn’t actually put in any of the work to “fully flesh out a queer character, and because it’s never explicitly shown onscreen, it gets left up to audience interpretation” (Gardener). With the final season currently in production, frustrated fans can only wait and hope that Byers gets the explicit confirmation that he deserves.

### *It Franchise*

In adapting the second film from the novel, *It Chapter Two* takes the elements of reading Kaspbrak as queer and works them into Tozier’s character instead. In a flashback to his childhood, Tozier is implied to have a crush on another boy he met at the arcade, and when Tozier tries to get the boy to stay for another game, he is bullied and harassed for his perceived gayness. As pointed out by Charles Pulliam-Moore, a culture critic whose work revolves around fandom, pop culture, politics, race, and sexuality:

All of this would work as perfectly fine character-building if it actually ended up leading to a more direct statement about Richie’s identity in the present. While a shy kid in 1988 being unable to verbalize his feelings for another boy makes a certain degree of sense, the



fact that the adult Richie is never able to verbally express it about himself feels weird for a movie set in 2016.

Tozier's issues with his sexuality are absolutely valid no matter what time it is based in, as every queer individual approaches and manages their sexuality in a different way; the issue is that his lack of self-acceptance here serves as a counterpoint to movie's whole purpose. In returning to their hometown of Derry to kill the monster they fought in their past, the plot of *It Chapter Two* follows the characters as they each separately embark on individual side quests to confront their most deep-rooted fears. The entire movie is about emotional growth as the characters overcome these fears and traumas; but again, Pulliam-Moore expresses that "even when it's trying to be nightmarishly on the nose, *It Chapter Two*'s inability to just come out and say that Richie's gay makes it feel as if the film's too scared to own up to what it's trying to say." Similar to the case of Will Byers in *Stranger Things*, Tozier's actor Bill Hader and director Muschietti verify Tozier's queerness in post-release interviews, but the issue of the matter is that it remains outside the source material. The closest the audience gets to a proper reveal is the scene where Tozier retches 'R+E' on the Kissing Bridge, and as Waylon Jordan points out, "queer horror fans are so starved for crumbs of representation in the genre that we love that we take two initials on a piece of wood and feel as though we've been fed a four-course meal." While the scene is emotionally powerful, it refrains from using any direct statements or clear proof of representation, likely as a means to avoid controversy.

### **Bury Your Gays**

According to Waggoner, who has a PhD in Communication, the "bury your gays" trope "has been used in television since 1976 for what producers and writers claim to be shock value," though it has been around as a literary trope since the late 19th century (Hulan). As the name

suggests, films and other media use this trope to the kill off of LGBTQ+ characters that are seen as more expendable than heteronormative characters. Often, the trope features a same-sex couple where one member of the pairing dies or the pairing is otherwise destroyed by the end of the story. Also called “dead lesbian syndrome” because of the disproportionate number of female characters who are subjected to this trope, “bury your gays” was implemented, so to speak, to “allow LGBTQ+ authors to tell stories which featured characters like them without risking social backlash, breaking laws regarding “promoting” homosexuality, or the loss of their career and that of their publisher” (Hulan). Despite the progression of social attitudes and laws regarding homosexuality, the trope persists into modern media, in a time and social context where it no longer remains necessary. As a result, it is a form of LGBTQ+ erasure rather than the screen of protection it once was, another harmful device to queer audiences who may view themselves as less worthy of life, as well as cisgendered and heteronormative audiences that may internalize these thoughts about queer individuals.

### *Stranger Things*

*Stranger Things* is rather known for its huge cast. Even actor Noah Schnapp (Will Byers) has stated that “[the Duffer brothers] need to kill off some people, it’s so big,” and lead actress Millie Bobby Brown (Eleven) agreed, saying that “the Duffer brothers are two sensitive sannies that don’t want to kill anyone off” (TheWrap). It is ironic, therefore, that out of the ten or so major character deaths through the show’s four-season runtime, five of these characters are heavily queer coded, while heteronormative characters such as Dr. Brenner and Jim Hopper have been given fake-out deaths that they’ve miraculously come back from. These queer coded deaths include the aforementioned Billy Hargrove and Eddie Munson, both of whom were noted for their involvement with stereotypical jock Steve Harrington. Hargrove’s death during the finale of

Season 3, admittedly, served as a focal plot point for Season 4, but the Duffers certainly could have chosen a different character instead of having Hargrove be the vessel for Mind Flayer (the season's main villain), which is what led to his death. Furthermore, despite being known throughout Seasons 2 and 3 as a secondary antagonist, he is given an extremely brief "redemption arc," where he saves protagonist Eleven's life and apologizes to his stepsister (Max Mayfield) before he succumbs to his horrific injuries.

Eddie Munson suffers a similar fate. Introduced in Season 4, Munson quickly became a fan favorite, especially among queer audiences who saw aspects of themselves in the character. Season 4 aired differently than the previous seasons in that it released in two volumes. Volume 1 consisted of the first seven episodes and was released on May 27, 2022, while the final two episode released on July 1, 2022. This month-long gap between releases meant that the hype surrounding the show could percolate, and indeed it did—especially the hype surrounding potential character deaths. Prior to Volume 2's release, Ross Duffer told *Variety*: "I don't really want to say, but I would be concerned about the characters going into Volume 2, for sure" (Maas). Still, it came as a shock when newly introduced but beloved Eddie Munson was one of the three main casualties of Volume 2. Many fans rightly predicted Munson's death (as the Duffers have developed a habit of introducing new characters each season with the sole purpose of killing them off), but it is the way that he died that shocked audiences to their core. Throughout Volume 1, Munson continually expressed his habit of running away from his problems; thus, in a final act of self-sacrifice and bravery, Munson draws away the colony of attacking bats, then stands his ground to serve as a distraction. As the heroes win and he lays dying, he says "I didn't run away this time."

His death was not just upsetting for fans; for many, it was infuriating in how unnecessary it was. Reddit user ‘mcivey’ said:

What bothered me the most is that they didn’t gain anything from him staying and fighting (and dying). He wasn’t a hero sacrificing himself so the plan could continue. He could have kept running for 5 more min and would have survived and the plan would still have kept moving forward. Maybe if him standing his ground was an actual sacrifice I would have liked it, but he stood his ground (and died) just to prove that he wouldn’t run? That sounds....idiotic.

A large portion of the fanbase agrees with this sentiment. As a *Nerdist* article points out, “Eddie may not be, strictly speaking, gay, although to be not of the norm is to be queer, but his clear narrative position is that of ‘The Other’” and as such, he “becomes a proxy for anyone who feels queer, unconventional, or unwelcome, for anyone who has ever feared for being themselves” (Rusak). Thus, Munson’s death is especially painful.

Perhaps even worse, the Duffers admitted in a podcast interview that Munson was never meant to survive Season 4, but even if he had, he would have never gotten a happy ending, whether he’d survived or not. Indeed, the Duffers believed death was the only logical outcome to Eddie’s story:

“There was never any other arc for him and there was no ‘how do you survive this’... At the very end, you see people still drawing devil horns on his head. No one in Hawkins is going to accept a supernatural explanation for this. He would have wound up in jail and this fantasy that he would have been able to walk and graduate sadly was not ever a realistic outcome for him” (Storey).

The fans of the show largely disagree. For many of the queer fans within the *Stranger Things* fanbase, Munson's death felt like an attack on themselves and others who are nonconforming or non-heteronormative. Rotem Rusak says it best: "In the end, soft, good, brave, proud-to-be-Other Eddie Munson dies in hell, exactly where those who hate him believe he belongs. And that sucks."

### *It Franchise*

*It Chapter Two* opens with a horrific hate crime committed on a gay couple, where one of the characters is murdered as quickly as they are introduced, which follows the trend of queer characters being used as little more than a plot device, introduced for the purpose of being killed off. Despite this event also occurring in King's original novel, director Muschietti had no qualms about reworking many details in his modern adaptation, so the inclusion of this scene is questionable at best—but according to Muschietti, including this scene was essential to the storytelling:

"It was very important to me because it is of relevance. I probably wouldn't have included it if it wasn't in the book, but it was very important for Stephen King. When he wrote it, he was talking about the evil in the human community. He was talking about how dark humans can get in a small American town...For me, it was important to include it because it's something that we're still suffering. Hate crimes are still happening. No matter how evolved we think society is going, there seems to be a winding back, especially in this day and age where these old values seem to be emerging from the darkness" (Malkin).

Still, King's novel, published in 1986, arguably handled the situation better than the 2019 remake. In the novel, the men responsible for the crime are convicted of manslaughter, and the

two men of age were given hefty prison sentences; in Muschietti's adaptation, the criminals run off, and the crime, the criminals, and the victims, are never mentioned again; and while Muschietti may not have intended to polarize or reject queer audiences, *It Chapter Two*'s efforts read as tone deaf and at its worst, "a throwback to a time when it was much preferred to hide queer characters and moreover queer *people* in a darkened corner to deal with their own issues without the aid of community or allies" (Jordan).

This is further noted with the death of Eddie Kaspbrak in the movie's climactic finale. His death is an incredibly emotional moment, and the movie makes a point of emphasizing Tozier's reactions specifically. The final cut saw Kaspbrak die in the midst of the finale battle, with Tozier in denial over his death, but director Muschietti revealed that multiple versions of Kaspbrak's death were filmed.

"There was actually a version where, after killing Pennywise, they return and Eddie's still like... And Eddie wants to say something, and he dies in the middle of his sentence. He says, "Richie, I..." And then goes. It was two different ways of solving the scene" (Desk). Indeed, while Tozier's sexuality is a plot point in *It Chapter Two*, despite not being officially confirmed, Kaspbrak's sexuality relies solely on subtext and coding. Gardner suggests that the film's directors "decided against making Eddie's sexuality more explicitly text in the film because of the risk of blowback over Eddie's death." Following the plot of the novel upon which the movie is based, Kaspbrak's death was an inevitability, as it was very unlikely that Muschietti would alter such a large plot point in his adaptation. Even so, the buildup between Tozier and Kaspbrak's relationship in both films is undeniably romantic-coded, hence why this death falls under the "bury your gays" trope.

At the end of *It Chapter Two*, Tozier's storyline is markedly the saddest of all the surviving characters in their friend group. Protagonist Bill Denbrough returns to his content life as a famous author, Ben Hanscom and Beverly Marsh's romantic subplot gets resolved and they end up together, and Mike Hanlon is finally free to leave the town of Derry and live his life, but Tozier's last scene in the movie shows him mourning Kaspbrak and the relationship they could have had. He is never given a coming out scene to his friends, and therefore never overcomes his fear of rejection based on his sexuality. Certainly, "we have hope for him to have a future where he's happy, but we never see it" (Gardner).

### **Conclusion**

In summary, it is evident that there is a problem with queer representation in modern television and film, particularly within high-budget media with big-name producers. Queer coding can be an effective device to appeal to LGBTQ+ audiences and provide a sense of relatability to characters, but queer coding can just as easily lead to a sense of wrongness or villainization within those same audiences. Furthermore, queer coding can quickly turn into queerbaiting, where queer coded language and imagery are utilized for the sake of attracting queer audiences without providing actual representation, usually as a financial and/or marketing scheme. The "bury your gays" trope is another device that has an unhealthy prevalence in contemporary television and film. All three of these can have intensely negative ramifications in their faulty, distorted representation of queer people and queer culture, and are noted in the high-budget productions *Stranger Things* and the *It* duology, two examples among many. This proliferation of negative queer stereotypes within media is a problem, and before it can be solved, it needs to be addressed. As Shaw and Lee state, "it is not enough to be tolerant of the differences among us, although that would be a good start; it is necessary to recognize

everyone's right to a piece of the pie and work toward equality of outcome and not just equality of access" (718).



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# **Sexual Education in the United States: A Need for Change**

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Sexual health education in the United States is in great distress and needs to be addressed. When looking at many different statistics that fall in the sexual health categories, such as sexual transmitted infections and diseases or teenage pregnancy in America, they are significantly high for how developed the United States is. This is a problem that the proper education and knowledge can take strides to amend. *Sex Education*, the Netflix Television Series set in the United Kingdom, is an amazing representation of just how the proper and correct knowledge liberates youth. The series brings so many sexual health issues to light that are typically swept under the rug because of the stigmas that may come along with those issues. However, these issues affect people all the time and in many different ways, just as portrayed in the show. When sexual health issues are left undiscussed, people don't have the information needed to begin addressing them, leaving those people vulnerable to physical, emotional, or mental affliction. Making the proper education on this subject matter a requirement in our school systems across the entire nation is essential.

**Sexual Education in the United States:  
A Need for Change**

*Sex Education, a TV series on Netflix set in the UK, is a show that examines many different scenarios regarding issues relating to the matter of sex. It ranges from issues the LGBTQ+ community faces to matters of sexual assault. The students in the show face these issues and work to make a change for the better despite forces working against them. The show is an admirable map depicting ways that our own society can work to change the way sex education happens in the United States.*

Purdue University Fort Wayne

January 12, 2023



Sex education in the United States has been an ongoing crisis. As of 2021, only twenty-nine states require sex education to be taught in their schools.<sup>1</sup> This is problematic for countless reasons such as the negative effect this lack of education has on the safety and health of young individuals. In order to combat this, America needs to make the proper education – a complete and inclusive education – on this subject matter a requirement in our school system across the nation. This means an education geared towards people of all races, gender, sexuality, and backgrounds. The Netflix Television Series, *Sex Education*, is a blueprint on how we can start working to educate the population with the right knowledge. The show touches on real issues that people face in their everyday life including issues regarding sex that are rarely addressed in school or elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> When these issues are not correctly addressed, it can cause people to go through these issues alone and could ultimately lead to physical, emotional, or mental distress. In short, a detriment to a person's overall health. Sex education in America needs to be reformed in order to create a more liberated, safer, and overall healthier nation.

Regarding the television series, it can be seen as a very influential piece of popular culture examining the issues faced when it comes to sexual education. It highlights the lack of knowledge many young people have on the topic and the problems they encounter because of this. Some areas addressed within the show include the topic of abstinence-based teaching, sexual health issues LGBTQ+ individuals face, sexual assault, and many more. All these areas

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<sup>1</sup> Megan Diamondstein, "Federal Bill Would Promote Youth Sex Education in U.S. | Center for Reproductive Rights," *Center for Reproductive Rights*, May 26, 2021. <https://reproductiverights.org/federal-bill-would-promote-youth-sex-education-in-u-s/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gillian Anderson, Asa Butterfield, Tayna Reynolds, Anne-Marie Duff, Alistair Petrie, and Dua Saleh, "Whole," *Sex Education*, Netflix, January 11, 2019.

circle back to exemplify how critical knowledge can be as a young adult navigating this new terrain.<sup>3</sup> It paints a great picture in what ways sexual health education need to be changed.

Everybody can remember how awkward and uncomfortable discussions about sex and sexual health could be when we were younger. However, these conversations do not need to be this way, and in fact, they should not be. Sex is a large part of most people's lives. With that being true, sex should not be something *taboo* to talk about. There are positive and negative consequences that can come along with sex and intercourse can vary in meaning from person to person. Because of this, the education we provide must be all inclusive; it cannot be centered around just the sex life of a white, straight individual, but rather include information geared toward individuals from all walks of life. Only six states specifically mandate inclusive sex education as of 2020.<sup>4</sup> In the United States alone, there are reported to be about 1,994,000 LGBT individuals ages 13-17.<sup>5</sup> With only six states requiring this type of sexual education, that leaves a tremendous number of LGBTQ+ individuals without the proper resources and knowledge to be safe in their sex practices. This lack of education can lead to some serious consequences such as poor sexual health, and therefore physical health.

One outdated practice of sexual education in schools would be teaching abstinence. In theory, teaching abstinence in schools would lead to lower numbers of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections or diseases. In reality, this is not the case. In season 3 episode 4 of

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<sup>3</sup> Gillian Anderson, Asa Butterfield, Tayna Reynolds, Anne-Marie Duff, Alistair Petrie, and Dua Saleh, "Whole," *Sex Education*, Netflix, January 11, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Russ, "Only 17 States and DC Report LGBTQ-Inclusive Sex Ed Curricula in at Least Half of Schools, despite Recent Increases - Child Trends," *Child Trends*, October 6, 2021. <https://www.childtrends.org/blog/only-17-states-and-dc-report-lgbtq-inclusive-sex-ed-curricula-in-at-least-half-of-schools-despite-recent-increases>.

<sup>5</sup> Kerith J. Conron, "LGBT Youth Population in the United States," *UCLA School of Law Williams Institute*, September 2020. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGBT-Youth-US-Pop-Sep-2020.pdf>

*Sex Education*, the outdated practice of teaching abstinence-only is brought up.<sup>6</sup> In the episode, it highlights how this style of sexual education can be misleading and lead to shame surrounding the topic. According to the Guttmacher Institute, 57% of teenagers end up having sex by the end of their high school careers.<sup>7</sup> With an abstinence-only education program, that means that those teenagers who are having sex might not have the knowledge or information on how to do so safely. Providing knowledge in this way only instills fear and shame in teenagers when it comes to sex. For instance, there are approximately 15 million STD infections reported in the United States each year, and teens make up a significant portion of those 15 million. In fact, individuals between the ages of 15-19 make up 40% of chlamydia cases.<sup>8</sup> For every 1,000 girls between the ages 15-19, teen pregnancy was reported for 16.7% of them.<sup>9</sup> With the right education, these numbers could significantly go down. A national survey done by researchers at the University of Washington found that the youth who received an abstinence only education were more likely to get pregnant than those given a full and comprehensive sexual education.<sup>10</sup>

So, what would an all-inclusive sex education curriculum look like? It would be a system where students are not only educated on the scientific information regarding the topic, but also about the emotional and mental aspects of sex as well. It would include information for people of

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<sup>6</sup> Gillian Anderson, Asa Butterfield, Tayna Reynolds, Anne-Marie Duff, Alistair Petrie, and Dua Saleh, "Whole," *Sex Education*, Netflix, January 11, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Guttmacher Institute, "Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Programs: Harmful and Ineffective," April 28, 2021. <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/abstinence-only-programs>.

<sup>8</sup> "Teens' Check-Ups and STD or Pregnancy Prevention Counseling," 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/stdconference/2000/media/teens2000.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> "About Teen Pregnancy," 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/teenpregnancy/about/index.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> "Study Finds That Comprehensive Sex Education Reduces Teen Pregnancy | News & Commentary | American Civil Liberties Union," *American Civil Liberties Union*, March 28, 2008. <https://www.aclu.org/news/reproductive-freedom/study-finds-comprehensive-sex-education-reduces-teen-pregnancy>.

all sexual orientation and identities.<sup>11</sup> It would include age-appropriate resources and information for all students throughout their education. It would inform them of all the options they have, shame-free. Shame and sex have been two words that have wrongfully gone hand in hand for too long. The shame surrounding sex can be detrimental to a person's well-being, especially when learning to feel that shame from such a young age. For example, victims of sexual abuse might feel too ashamed to come forward about their situation, leaving an extremely negative impact on their mental or physical health; a person who contracted an STD might feel too ashamed to seek the right treatment, again negatively impacting their mental or physical health.<sup>12</sup>

One way the United States could combat this education crisis would be to hire sexual health professionals to educate youth across the nation. For instance, one of the main characters in the show *Sex Education*, Jean Milburn, is a sex therapist. She helps many different people throughout the course of the series with a vast number of sex-related health problems. Milburn is hired by the school to work with the students to revamp the sex education curriculum and navigate a way to bring a safe and effective space for these young adults to work through difficulties they might face.<sup>13</sup> This is just one specific example of how these trained professionals can make a huge difference in the lives of teenagers regarding sex practices.

Other steps have been taken in the realm of sexual education, like in the states of New Jersey and Illinois. Research done by a Montclair State University professor of public health, Eva Goldfarb, has shown that a full and complete education in the sexual aspect can reduce intimate partner violence, as well as with bullying towards LGBTQ+ individuals. Goldfarb's

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<sup>11</sup> "America's Sex Education: How We Are Failing Our Students," *USC-MSN*, September 18, 2017. <https://nursing.usc.edu/blog/americas-sex-education/>.

<sup>12</sup> Monica Faulkner, "When Sex Education Emphasizes Shame, It Harms Youth Who Have Been Sexually Abused," *Phys.org*, September 3, 2015. <https://phys.org/news/2015-09-sex-emphasizes-shame-youth-sexually.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Gillian Anderson, et al., "Whole," January 11, 2019

research also proved to promote healthy relationship skills, an extremely beneficial quality to have, not only in an intimate sense. “The goal is helping people to have the important, functional knowledge and skills and attitudes to make healthy decisions for themselves, to appreciate and enjoy their own bodies and sexuality, and to appreciate and respect the bodies of others as well,” as expressed by Goldfarb.<sup>14</sup>

Overall, it can be seen in many different aspects that the American sexual education system is failing. The majority of youth in the United States are not educated the correct, safe, and healthy way in regard to sex. This issue is standing in the way of lowering troubling statistics in relation to teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases or infections. It is also in the way of allowing our youth to feel prepared and ready for when the time comes they may be intimate with another person. We must work towards addressing this issue head on by reevaluating these out-of-practice ways of sexual education that are clearly ineffective. When people are properly educated and have access to all the proper resources regarding a certain topic, they feel more confident, comfortable, and secure in decisions they make in relation to it—and the same goes for sexual health. Enforcing a comprehensive and inclusive sexual education will finally allow for our nation to become healthier, safer, and ultimately liberated.

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Schwartz, “The Sex Ed. Battleground Heats up (Again). Here’s What’s Actually in New Standards,” *Education Week*, August 22, 2022. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-sex-ed-battleground-heats-up-again-heres-whats-actually-in-new-standards/2022/08>.

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# Fun Colored Pencil

**Francesca Carlo**

**Faculty Mentor: Ronald Knepper, LTL**

**Purdue University Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne, IN**

**ABSTRACT** This piece is a colored pencil still life. It was done for Drawing Fundamentals under Professor Ronald Knepper. The project guidelines were to depict three objects, a patterned cloth background, and one of the objects had to be reflective with a self-portrait in the reflection. My piece depicts a tea kettle with my self-reflection, a small plastic apple, and a bowling ball referenced from an original still life photograph. This was done on 14" by 17" bristol board in colored pencils.

I have completed very little colored pencil pieces in my life and none of them have been in the style of realism. This project boosted my confidence as an artist and confidence in my ability to use different and new mediums. Blending with colored pencil was essential in this project, so I adapted my skillset to include handling the density of the pencils. It introduced the idea of blending whilst layering that I will utilize in future projects.





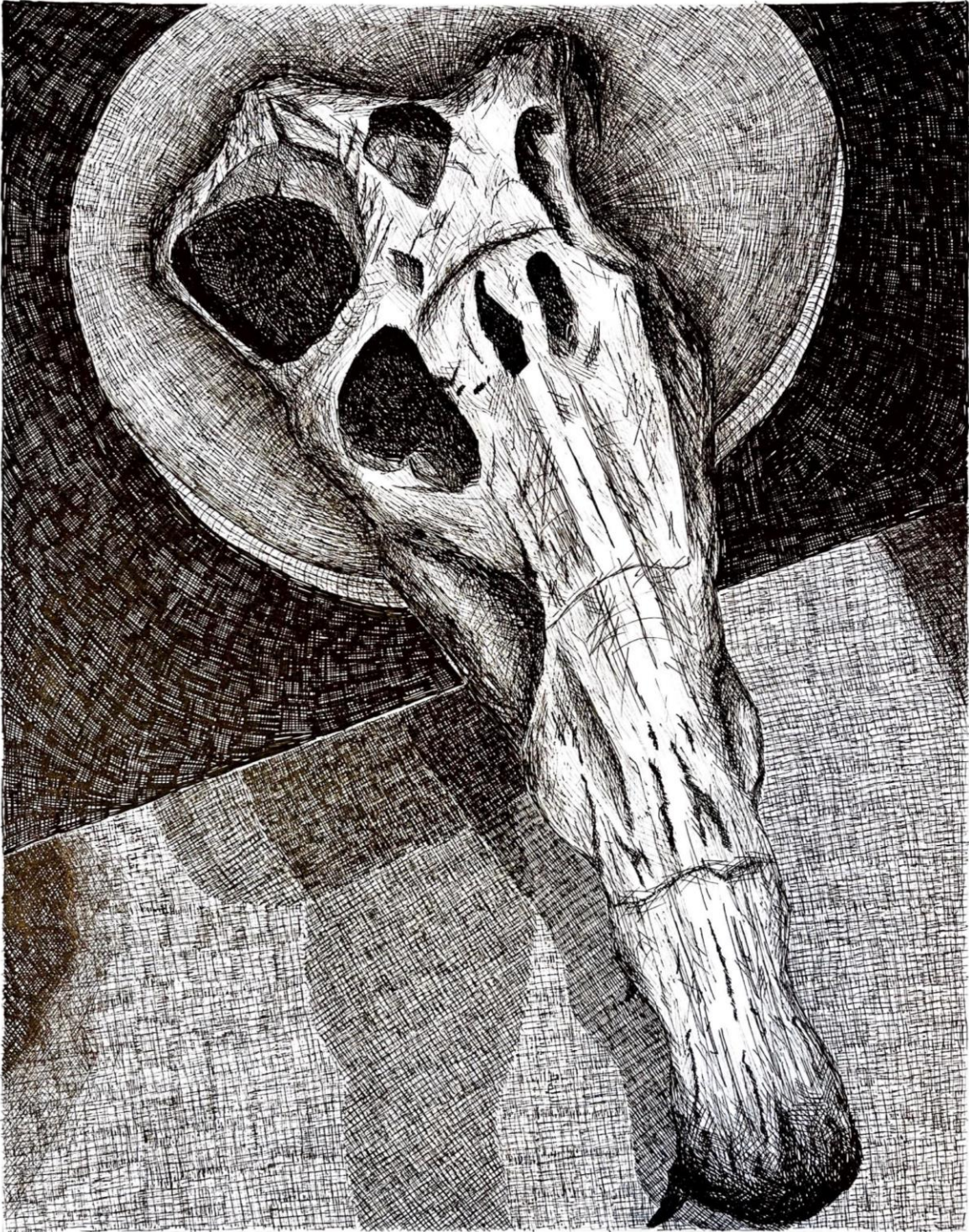
*Draw Fun Colored Pencil (2023)*

# Fun Crosshatch

Francesca Carlo

**Faculty Mentor: Ronald Knepper, LTL  
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**ABSTRACT** This piece is a cross hatching artwork on a 14" by 17" piece of bristol board. Cross hatching is the technique of making repeated perpendicular lines of varying weights. The subject depicted is an original picture from the Cleveland Museum of Natural History of a Nicrosaurus skull. It was completed in Micron pens for Drawing Fundamentals class under Professor Ronald Knepper. It was done in low-light chiaroscuro style. This project was the first time I had utilized the cross hatching style. First off, I felt very confident in this art style and learned that I excel with small repeated motions as a means to create a project. In the future, I aim to attempt this style again or similar styles such as hatching and stippling. Secondly, this project changed the way I view value. Without the ability to create multiple tones, it made me think about value in a way that only uses positive and negative space and enhanced my designing abilities of spatial awareness. I am very proud of this project and it made me feel more accomplished as an artist in a realism setting.



*Fun Crosshatch (2023)*

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