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# SASSMM'S POP CULTURE TAKE

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## MY BRILLIANT FRIEND, SEASON 2, EPISODE 5: *WAS THAT A RAPE SCENE?*

April 30, 2020

Written by Julia, SASSMM  
advocate and educator

My Brilliant Friend is a historical HBO series set in Naples, Italy during the 1950's. The episodes follow the lives of two girls into adulthood: Lenu Greco and her closest friend, Lila Cerullo. It is a story of their intense but turbulent friendship, as well as their struggles growing up in a working class neighborhood. The show has not shied away from showing domestic and sexual violence, but its portrayals are often nuanced and tend to prompt discussion and disagreement about what is actually being shown. The beach scene of Lenu and Donato Sarratore in "The Betrayal", episode 5 of season 2, is a good example. The scene shows a complicated representation of rape that challenges our assumptions, and the discussion surrounding it has revealed some of the myths we still hold about sexual violence.

When Donato found Lenu alone on the beach, a chill ran down my spine. Donato and his family are acquaintances of Lenu, but they only cross paths while on summer vacation on Ischia, an island off the coast of Naples. The last time these two characters were alone together at night – a harrowing scene in Season 1 – Donato sexually assaults Lenu just steps from a terrace overlooking the sea. Her tears catch the moonlight as they drip onto her shirt. The memory is still fresh for viewers and for Lenu: in an earlier episode, she looks afraid when she sees Donato. The tension at the beginning of this scene, moments before Donato appeared, seemed to suggest something terrible might happen.

So, was it a rape scene? Did Lenu initiate it? Could she have stopped it? Is Donato a predator or just a sad old man? These are some of the questions I've noticed swirling around the internet since the episode aired. Many people online have suggested that Lenu "instigated" what occurred, "allowed it" to happen, and was "seeking the attention" of the man who violated her. No, just no.

When it comes to sexual consent, we must pay attention to what is actually happening in the situation, not only whether a person said "yes" or "no". Consent cannot exist where there is deeply unequal power, such as the relationship between Lenu and Donato. Moments before the assault, Lenu places her head on Donato's chest and says, "I'm a bit cold". This is not the same as asking for sex, and yet so many have viewed this as Lenu saying she was okay with sex. Instead of focusing on her actions and what they might say, let's look at Donato's actions.

**Consent is an active, ongoing choice based on equal power. You cannot gain someone's consent through pressure or coercion.**

Donato displays abusive and predatory behaviors during his interactions with Lenu. When he joins Lenu on the beach, he tells her that everyone else is asleep. He makes his intentions clear: "You'll have to forgive me, Lenu. The heart wants what it wants. And you are too beautiful." He recognizes that she is feeling upset and vulnerable, and manipulates her with flattery. "You and I have the same sensibility," he, a grown man with a son her age – says to her, a child.

Often, a situation is only seen as sexual assault if the person fought back or aggressively said “no”. This expectation results in many people who are assaulted believing they did something wrong. Lenu’s assault was caused by Donato – the person who assaulted her. It was not the result of anything Lenu did or didn’t do, and the fact that she did not fight off Donato’s advances does not equal her consent.

During the assault, the camera focuses on Lenu’s face. She lies still, stares blankly, and seems to have mentally left her body. This is called “dissociation” and is something many survivors experience. An earlier moment in Season 2 comes to mind – a scene when Lenu’s friend Lila is sexually assaulted by her new husband on her wedding night. After attempting to fight off her husband in every way she can, Lila eventually wears the same expression we see now on Lenu’s face. This expression makes it clear that sexual assault is being portrayed. During consensual sex, neither partner looks terrified or completely absent.

My work as a sexual violence advocate and educator has given me the skills to recognize abuse, but I know that many people may not share my perspective. We are generally not taught about healthy sexual relationships or how to identify sexual assault, and too often, lack of consent is seen as normal. This is especially true when a situation doesn’t follow our expectations of how victims and perpetrators behave.



Moments after the assault, as Lenu adjusts her underwear and dress with trembling movements, Donato leans into the frame, whispering: "This is a secret between me and you – you must lock it away in your heart." Once again Donato's behavior fits the mold of a classic predator, but the same cannot be said of Lenu as a victim. When she abruptly rises, looking down at Donato with disgust, we feel the urge to cheer. "We won't see each other tomorrow or the day after," she spits out. "We'll never see each other again!"

Her words are powerful, and we're tempted to believe that she was somehow in control the whole time. In her narration, she even assures us: "That's how I wanted it to be and I imposed it on myself. . ." We're instantly reminded of the moment before Donato appears on the beach, as Lenu sits full of despair and self-loathing, narrating: "I wished that right there on the sea shore, murderers would come out of the night and torture my body, that the worst would happen to me. . ."

Abuse can sometimes trigger feelings of self-hatred, including the belief that the harm was deserved. And yet, a self-destructive thought does not make someone responsible for the violence others perpetrate against them. Individuals cope with terrible experiences in many ways, but the power to claim control of your own suffering is not real power at all. It is all too clear that in this scene, Lenu was cornered, manipulated, and sexually exploited. By recognizing the violence she survived, we affirm that a survivor is never complicit in their own abuse.

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