
SASSMM'S POP CULTURE TAKE



EXAMINING NANCY AND STEVE'S RELATIONSHIP IN *STRANGER THINGS*

August 24, 2022

Written by Elise, SASSMM
advocate and educator

I'm in the depths of season four of *Stranger Things*, and it looks like Steve and Nancy might get back together. I still have four episodes left to go, but the moment between Steve and Nancy in Victor Creel's house, when she removed the cobwebs from his hair, made a pit grow in my stomach. It's a kind gesture on its face, and I'm sure many fans had been eager to see this reconnection since Nancy and Steve went separate ways after season one – but I still remember that night at Steve's house. Not because that's when Barb got taken by a Demogorgon, but because of the ending scene between Steve and Nancy, where they presumably had sex. Nancy appeared nervous and unsure of how she wanted to move forward, and Steve assured her that she looked great.

They embrace and kiss, and the scene ends with Nancy leaving Steve's bed while he's sleeping. I think for a lot of survivors of sexual assault, this scene could bring up feelings or bodily reactions related to a past assault. I know for myself, a sexual assault advocate, the uncertainty and doubt present in this scene was a lot to take in.

Labeling this scene as "assault" might feel harsh to some, especially because our society often thinks of sexual violence as a situation between strangers where there was physical restraint. Steve has also emerged as a fan-favorite character as the series progressed, now that the writers positioned his character as a comedic "babysitter" of the Hawkins Middle School kids engaged in fighting the Upside Down. But just because we may have grown to love a character doesn't mean that their actions, whether previous or current, can't be called into question. Just because the show's writers have done some serious

character development (and honestly, improvement - even I have grown to love Steve) doesn't mean we can't attach some accountability. I invite us to take the time to think about this scene and the nuances of consent and sexual violence. I don't have answers, just thoughts and questions! As advocates, we don't label people's experiences for them, but as educators, we do like to provide information about consent, boundaries, and what sexual violence can look like.

“Just because we may have grown to love a character doesn't mean that their actions, whether previous or current, can't be called into question.”



Sexual violence is an umbrella term for any sexual activity that is done without consent. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center describes consent as: "Giving permission for something to happen or agreeing to do something. This means they need to know specifically what they're agreeing to." Consent must be freely given, meaning the person being asked must feel safe and comfortable saying no.

During this scene at Steve's house, Nancy had just started dating Steve. This was a choice criticized by Nancy's best friend, Barb, and it was their first time at a party with Steve and his friends, Tommy and Carol. There were moments when it appeared that Nancy felt like she needed to prove herself by engaging in activities she hadn't normally participated in, like shot-gunning beers and jumping into the pool with her clothes on. Barb often made it a point to criticize Nancy for these uncharacteristic behaviors.



When Nancy and Steve head upstairs to change out of their wet clothing, Nancy appears hesitant and nervous. These feelings on their own are normal for someone experiencing new things in a new relationship, and Steve appears to try to keep her relaxed – but his reason for doing so seems to be the desire to have sex. I'm not sure if Nancy wanted to have sex in order to resolve feelings of having something to prove or if she felt ready to take that step with Steve. Her reaction around him the next day at school appeared wavering, as she first mentions anxiety about her peers staring at her. This presumably is because she's worried her classmates found out about what happened. It's hard to fully decipher if what Nancy is feeling is boundary-crossing from the night before or concern for Barb's disappearance, or something in between. But from this point on, Nancy and Steve grow apart and eventually break up.

I've watched this scene a couple times, and am still processing all of the nuances. What I do know is that in an interview with GQ back in 2017, Joe Keery, the actor who plays Steve, revealed that there were underpinnings of sexual violence in this scene. "When I got the script, Steve was definitely a little harsher. He was having this party—I think it was on a beach, because it originally took

place in Montauk, Long Island. And he was a total, total dick. He forced himself on Nancy. Way harsher."

Way harsher. Which implies that this scene was written to be nonconsensual or unclear.

“

When there isn't space for boundary-sharing & examining power dynamics, it can create a culture where sexual violence happens & is ignored.

Situations like this remind me of the importance of open communication, especially within dating relationships. Consent is essential in all sexual encounters, regardless of the relationship between the people involved. Had Steve asked Nancy how she was feeling or what she wanted – giving her space to share, if she felt comfortable – Steve could have better discerned how Nancy was feeling. Of course, Nancy would have had to feel safe saying yes or no, and the elements around them make this murky (being in a new space with new people and the unbalanced power dynamic this carries). We also don't know if Steve was aware of these elements and just chose to ignore them.

If Nancy described this night with Steve as sexual assault, I think it would be understandable. Unless this comes about at the end of season four, or perhaps the next season, we may never know how this felt for Nancy. It's disappointing that this scene went unexamined and that Nancy's character wasn't allowed to explore these feelings, as trailing right past this incident inherently normalizes unclear sexual encounters and sexual violence. With that said, even though *Stranger Things* glossed over this scene, we can still talk about what happened between Nancy and Steve and how interactions like this are normalized in our society. When there isn't space for boundary-sharing and examining power dynamics, it can create a culture where sexual violence happens and is ignored.

