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## **Only the Strong Survive: Portrayals of Battling Ideals of Masculinity in *Stranger Things***

*Ava Watson*

*Stranger Things* garnered massive success by evoking the aesthetics and themes of the 1980s; it situates itself in this era not only to pay homage to time-period epics such as Stephen Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* and John Carpenter's *The Thing*, among other popular culture icons, but to question the time viewed so frequently with rose-colored glasses. One facet of 1980s America which *Stranger Things* examines is the reevaluation of gender constructs and norms that arose at this time. Masculinity saw itself at a crossroad, and season 2 of *Stranger Things* pits the emerging ideal of softer masculinity and heroism against its traditional, tougher counterpart through the characters of Bob and Hopper; this is shown by their differences in demeanor, skills, and fate. The Duffer Brothers' creation of these opposing forces and the gruesome death of Bob serve to comment on the condemnation of "new" masculinity and the prevailing ideal of "real" masculinity, as well as a reexamination of what can constitute a hero.

As stated earlier, the 1980s witnessed men reconsidering their beliefs about masculinity. Contois, in an article for the *European Journal of American Culture*, analyzed this change through the lens of the culturally iconic *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche: A Guidebook to All that Is Truly Masculine* by Bruce Feirstein. Contois asserted that, "Even if written for laughs, Feirstein's 'manly' rules document the negotiation of gender taking place in the early 1980s, a moment of startling gender crisis that pitted older, traditional, White masculinity against 'the new man'" (Contois 185). Gender's precarious situation in the eighties began a war of these two forms of masculinity; the question of what makes a good man saw answers in hypermasculine movies with traditional male heroes, as seen with some of the most celebrated films of the eighties. However, the value of the "new man" was highly debated. In *Stranger Things*, the war on masculinity is recapitulated through the characters of Hopper and Bob. Hopper plays the role of the small-town hero; he is a sheriff with a bulky frame, he is skilled with weapons, and he does not cower in the face of danger. These details are all characteristic of a "real man" and traditional hero. While Hopper was the sole image of classic masculinity in season 1, Bob's introduction as a new father-like figure and eventual hero established the opposing formation of "new masculinity" in the eighties. Bob represents the emerging "new man," as he is supportive, kind, not overly authoritarian, and sports non-traditional skills that explore the frontiers of technology. This dichotomy between "new man" and "real man" ideals is teamed with emerging forms of heroism to comment on the value of these differing types of masculinity.

In *Stranger Things* season 2, Bob exhibits a new kind of heroism which began to form in the eighties. Thomas Haigh explores the evolution of hacking's image in his article "When Hackers Were

Heroes: The complex legacy of Steven Levy’s programmers.” After Steven Levy broke norms by calling hackers heroes in a monumental tech journalism piece in 1984, Haigh explains that, “Making hackers into heroes, rather than figures of fun or threat, was a bold move. Even within the computing community, “hacker” was an insult as often as a point of pride” (Haigh 28). Coincidentally, *Stranger Things* frames Bob as a hacking hero when he sacrifices his safety to disable the security systems in season 2; this happens to take place in the same year that Levy released his foundational article (MADMAX 00:24). This could have been an intentional move by the Duffer brothers to establish Bob as a rising hero, since his most heroic moments feature filming techniques and aesthetics reminiscent of contemporary hacker movies, where hackers are praised rather than shamed. For instance, as Bob hacks the computer to unlock the doors, he says cheesy one-liners such as, “Open sesame” and “Ok. And splash” (“The Mind Flayer” 16:06-16:54). These lines channel the witty tone of hacking movies, thus creating a connection between the two mediums that situates Bob as a skilled and valiant figure. This was a new archetype being established in the eighties, and it directly juxtaposes the more serious and physically capable heroes, such as Hopper, that dominated action film spaces.

This echoing of hacker films is expounded upon by the camera angle that splits Bob’s face into two halves — his eyes and the computer (“The Mind Flayer” 15:55). This shot not only continues to call on classic, heroic hacking imagery, but it also represents Bob’s connection to technology; the half and half frame composition illustrates how technology is an extension of himself. This is comparable to how a gun is an inherent part of a classic hero like Hopper. Therefore, this shot demonstrates how intrinsically connected Bob is to technology, and it parallels a traditional hero’s connection to guns. One piece of dialogue cements the inception of Bob’s status as a modern hero; before he leaves the safety of the surveillance room, he says to Joyce, “Remember, Bob Newby, superhero” (11:45). In this line, he definitively states himself to be a hero. Despite possessing little athleticism, not knowing how to work a gun, and lacking a commanding and authoritative presence, Bob still becomes a hero, and he does so because of his technological prowess. As such, the Duffer brothers highlight the emergence of the eighties hacking hero through Bob’s skills, lines, and shots. In doing so, they also establish the “new man” as valuable, thus positioning the “new man” as a respectable figure.

Whereas “The Mind Flayer” highlights the value of Bob as a representation of the “new man” and hero, it demonstrates the failings of the traditional hero through its comparisons between Bob and Hopper. Hopper’s shortcomings are first shown by his incompetence regarding the security system. To escape the infested lab, Hopper rashly rushes to reset the breakers, believing that doing so will allow them to leave (11:06). When Bob explains that he needs to know BASIC to unlock the doors, Hopper says, “Teach it to me” to which Bob responds, “Shall I teach you French while I’m at it, Jim” (11:19)? This scene demonstrates the sacrificial, “headfirst” strategy that Hopper, and other classic heroes, use in dangerous situations. They do not fully think through their next steps, instead opting to act quickly to try and improve the situation. Bob’s skepticism of Hopper’s plan highlights the flaws of this mentality. This scene also portrays Hopper’s ignorance regarding technology, which made him incapable of aiding the others. Therefore, Bob further establishes himself as the new hero of this story through stepping in for Hopper’s inadequacies. The lighting also serves to illustrate Hopper’s weakness; he is in darkness when talking to Bob, the new hero, who is more illuminated. The darkness signals his lack of knowledge and his inability to help, whereas Bob’s brighter lighting signals the opposite. Therefore, this scene shows Hopper’s failings as the traditional hero, and it characterizes Bob as the new hero who is more capable of handling the situation.

Another moment that places Hopper’s value into question is Bob’s death scene towards the end of the episode. Up until this point, Hopper still aided the group in contexts where the traditionally masculine hero excels. However, when Bob is attacked by the Demogorgon, Hopper is unable to save

him; his gun, the instrumental tool to his heroics, does not affect the Demogorgon, and so he takes Joyce and leaves (21:10-21:32). This was the perfect situation to reestablish Hopper's value as the "real man." Despite this, he failed to protect Bob, therefore highlighting the faults of the traditional hero even in a context when he should be able to succeed. Thus, the Duffer brothers utilized this scene to further devalue Hopper, and therefore the archetype which he represents. Interestingly, though, is that Hopper survives this scene and Bob does not.

Bob's death was a strategic choice to signal the underlying narrative that the "new men" of the 1980s were not strong enough to survive against "real men." In Bob's death scene, he safely blocks in the Demogorgon and exchanges a smile with Joyce, only to be attacked from the side by another, hidden Demogorgon (20:40-20:50). While this scene's framing was done for shock value, it also shows that Bob could have survived. He successfully escaped the lab, narrowly evading a Demogorgon, made it back to Joyce, and he was painted as the hero of this situation; this shows that he was strong enough to survive the Demogorgon attack. Therefore, having Bob's death framed this way symbolically conveys that "new men," despite possessing useful abilities that recontextualize them as heroes, are not allowed to survive in the stories of 1980s traditionally masculine heroes. This is why Hopper, the cowboy-like sheriff and embodiment of the "real man" mentality, survived despite not being the savior of this episode. Another facet is added to this message by the devil imagery and hell parallels that appear in Bob's death scene. Just before Bob is eaten by the Demogorgon, the camera takes the place of Bob as its pentagram-shaped mouth encompasses the screen (21:08). This allusion to the devil, especially as it appears on the being that consumes him, conveys the idea that Bob, and consequently "new men," go to hell. This could call upon toxic masculine beliefs that effeminate men, which some believe include "new men," deserve the same fate. The pentagram imagery appears again as the pack of Demogorgons eat Bob, forming the shape with his body (22:34). This imagery is the last time Bob is shown, and his death scene is one of the most gruesome moments in *Stranger Things*. Therefore, this scene portrays the horrid retribution Bob was forced to face as the "new man," and it represents how ideals about the superiority of the "real man" prevailed in this time through eighties mentalities and the reoccurrence of hypermasculine themes and aesthetics in eighties films.

*Stranger Things* creates expansive conversation with each facet of 1980s American society it decides to discuss. Therefore, the Duffer brothers' choices are deliberate, and each one holds potential for examination. Their addition of Bob and his subsequent elimination serves to start a conversation about society's perception of a strong man, both in the 1980s and the modern day. If asked today to imagine a masculine, heroic man, Bob would not be the first to come to mind. In some cases, however, Hopper would. Thus, Bob's character portrays a hero who subverts expectations, which the Duffer brothers are known to do. He represents the "new man," a figure who was not afforded respect, but began to deconstruct persisting toxic masculine beliefs; he also represents the development of hackers as new, praised archetypes. These were portrayed through Bob's existence as a foil to Hopper, highlighting his failings as a hero who needed modernized skills and ideas. In the end, Bob was not allowed to survive in *Stranger Things*, and resultantly, the "new man" was not allowed to survive in the eighties or in its popular films. Bob's death represents the continuation of traditionally masculine ideals, despite the knowledge of their defects. The "real man" ideology has persisted to the modern day, where even now men are discredited for possessing skills and beliefs opposing the existing image of masculinity. Therefore, Bob was never going to survive *Stranger Things*, as his existence was too progressive and sensitive to be allowed to exist.

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