

Asexual Representation in Fiction

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Abstract

This study focused on the appearance of asexual characters within fictional literature and media. These appearances, or representation, were analyzed in terms of whether they show asexuality and asexual people in a positive or negative light, and whether they were problematic or helped to foster understanding of asexuality and asexual people. To accomplish this, the research includes an explanation of asexuality and asexual people, and explains the importance of representing minority groups in fiction. I find that representation of asexuality has limitations, though this representation does exist in current fictional literature and some media. I also find that existing representation of asexuality is mostly positive and fosters understanding of asexuality and works to dispel myths about asexuality and asexual people.

Keywords: asexuality, asexual people, fiction, representation, sexual orientation

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Introduction

“Representation matters” is a phrase often used in recent years to encourage the inclusion of minority groups in fiction and media. The idea is that when people see themselves portrayed in the media they consume, whether fictional or nonfictional, they feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. This is especially true when the existing representation of minority groups serves to further marginalize or villainize them. In a study looking at the effect of representation of bisexuality with regards to the mental health of bisexual people, Johnson (2016) states that “Music, film, pornography, and television are all examples of media that can have a subconscious effect in shaping the way we look at the world” (p.379). Representation matters, then, not only to the group being represented, but to everyone who views the representation of that group. If black people are only ever portrayed in media as drug dealers and gang members, then that is the only way they will ever be perceived by the people who view that representation. If instead black people are portrayed in media as heroes (such as Black Panther), as doctors, and as leaders, then the people who view that representation will view black people in a different light.

Asexuality is one such minority group which, when it is represented at all, is often represented as something bad, wrong, or unnatural. This is not the case. Asexual people are not sick, they do not need to be fixed, and the only major difference between an asexual person and a sexual person is that the asexual person has no desire to have sex and does not experience sexual attraction. The idea that asexual people are in some way broken or sick comes from the concept of compulsory sexuality, the assumption that all people are sexual (Gupta, 2015, p.132) and negative portrayals of asexuality reinforce this assumption. However, the portrayals of asexuality

discussed here are mostly positive, which indicates a shift in attitudes toward asexuality. Further representation of asexuality in media should be encouraged. While the current representation is a good start, asexuality is still misunderstood and stigmatized, and continued positive representation can aid in the understanding of asexuality and asexual people.

Definitions

1. Asexuality: the absence or lack of sexual attraction and sexual desire towards others. A person who experiences asexuality is called an asexual person or simply an asexual.
2. Ace: a slang term coined by the asexual community meaning an asexual person.
3. Representation: the portrayal of asexuality or an asexual person in media.

Literature Review

Before looking at fictional representation, an understanding of asexuality is required; the existing body of research on asexuality is slim, and much of the research agrees with other research. Gupta (2015) is in agreement with Prause and Graham (2007) in regards to the idea that some level of sexuality is assumed, and that this leads to the stigmatization of asexuality and asexual people. Gupta (2015) also agrees with the research done by Cerankowski and Milks (2010) in which they state that pathologizing asexuality has led to the negative view of asexuality and is harmful to asexual people. Johnson (2016) discusses bisexuality, briefly touching on the concept of compulsory sexuality and looking at issues faced by bisexual people, which are also issues that may affect asexual people, such as negative representation of their sexual orientation; the desire to see accurate portrayals of one's sexual orientation; and the desire to be accepted if and when they reveal their sexual orientation to others (p.391). Johnson's research also explains the effect of media representation on societal views of a minority group, which in Johnson's research is bisexual people.

Bogaert (2015) focused research on understanding asexuality. He discusses that currently the asexual population is an unknown quantity, and that people who do identify as asexual are not all the same in their attitudes toward sex and sexual behavior. He also explains that asexual people are not necessarily also aromantic (lacking romantic attraction toward others); asexual people can (and many do) want and feel romantic attraction and experience romantic love. Van Houdenhove, Gijs, T'Sjoen, and Enzlin (2015) also stressed the importance for researchers to “distinguish between romantic and sexual orientation” and explained that through the concept of a “demisexual” (someone who experiences sexual attraction only after forming a strong emotional connection with a person), the asexual community does not have a rigid view of asexuality and “allows individuals to vary in the degree to which they are asexual” (p.675).

The concept of compulsory sexuality is important in viewing not only portrayals of asexuality in media but also portrayals of sexuality in media. Romantic comedy films often end with the main characters engaging in a sexual relationship with one another, indicating that they have started a *romantic* partnership, which promotes the idea that romantic and sexual orientation are the same thing, which is not true. The value placed on virginity (especially female virginity) assumes that worth is directly tied to sexual purity, which implies an expectation that at some point, someone's sexual purity ceases to exist. Portrayals of celibacy are often limited to people who choose to be celibate for religious purposes, such as nuns and monks, and people who cannot physically have sex. Popular party games for unsupervised teenagers include “Spin the Bottle,” during which a person spins a bottle and is expected to kiss whomever the bottle lands on; and “7 Minutes in Heaven” during which two people enter a closet or private room for seven minutes with the expectation that they will engage in some form of sexual behavior, even if it is only kissing.

The concept of asexuality as a spectrum is equally important in understanding asexuality and viewing its portrayal in media. The asexual community is understood in the existing research to largely define itself. A person who is asexual can have sex if they choose; celibacy is not a requirement of identifying as asexual. Some asexual people do choose to have sexual relationships or engage in sexual behaviors; Cerankowski and Milks (2010) quoted study participants as describing not “getting anything” when engaged in sexual behaviors (p.345) and Gupta (2015) explains that sexual activity is not an indication of sexual desire, and that sex can be both consensual and unwanted (p.135) meaning a person consents to have sex not because they desire sex, but because their partner desires sex. This is not the same as being coerced into sex; an asexual person chooses to engage in sexual activity of their own volition, despite not being interested in having sex.

Cerankowski and Milks (2010) discuss the idea that asexual people are often forced to defend their asexuality when they choose to reveal it: “asexual people are often told that they are inchoate, that they haven’t yet fully developed and experienced their sexuality, or they are interrogated about past traumas and sexual abuse” (p.661). This is a clear theme I have found in the course of this study, repeatedly coming across characters who feel a sense of dread when “coming out” to others because of the questions they receive and the reactions they have seen in the past.

Methodology

The Purchase College Library database was used to access existing research on asexuality, representation, and sexual orientations. The Google search engine was used to search for books and television shows featuring asexual characters. The Interlibrary Loan at Purchase College Library was then used to obtain the books which featured asexual characters, as well as

the Nanuet Public Library. Netflix and Hulu were used to access the television shows featuring asexual characters. For the purposes of this research, only characters explicitly stated to either be asexual or who described asexual feelings are considered to be asexual and were studied.

Results

Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature offered the most representations of asexuality, with asexual characters being portrayed as protagonists in four of the six novels studied. For most of these characters, asexuality is a part of them but is not the focus of the novel in which they appear. The exception is Kann's *Let's Talk About Love* (2018) which features a young asexual woman named Alice Johnson. Kann's book opens with Alice being dumped by her girlfriend, Margot, because she does not want to have sex, and faces questions such as "Have you gone to a doctor?", "Were you abused?", and "Are you saving yourself for marriage?" because Margot believes that "people don't just not like sex without a reason" (p.4). Because of questions like this, Alice chooses to remain "in the closet" to most people, but eventually comes out to her therapist, who validates her identity and does not believe that her asexuality is a problem. She also eventually comes out to her crush, Takumi, who struggles with liking Alice and also wanting to have sex, but finally comes to the conclusion that while Alice does not feel sexual attraction, she does feel passion and desire, and the book ends with a domestic scene of Takumi and Alice six months into their relationship.

Takumi's struggle to decide if he should (or even can) date his crush even though she is asexual is also a struggle experienced by Milo, the love interest of Tori in *Quicksilver*. Tori is an alien (though from a species that is very close to humans) and initially believes that her asexuality was an "alien thing," but that idea is dismissed when Tori realizes that fellow alien

Sebastian is not asexual. Like Alice, Tori anticipates a barrage of questions when she comes out to Milo, and expects to have to defend or explain her asexuality to him. Like Takumi, Milo is unsure about dating Tori because she is asexual and he is not; but Milo comes to the conclusion that “if I didn’t try to make this work, I’d regret it for the rest of my life. Because I’m never going to meet anyone else like you” (Anderson, 2013, p.312).

Tori is the narrator of *Quicksilver* and *Let’s Talk About Love* is written from a third person perspective in which the narrator does not know about events in which Alice is not directly involved. Both of these novels speak to the experience of an asexual person and how asexual people feel about their own sexuality, and how they view the society in which they live. Both young women assume people will think there is something wrong with them and that they must defend who they are. In Oshiro’s *Anger is a Gift*, Kaisha (a minor character) explains that before she was in a relationship, “So many men thought that they were *the one* who could prove to me that I wasn’t ace” (p.401). While Tori faced negative attitudes from her friends, Alice and Kaisha have friends who accept them as they are and do not think their asexuality is a problem.

In *Guardian of the Dead* (Healey, 2010), sexual behavior from an asexual character is actually an indication to his friends that something is wrong. Kevin, the best friend of protagonist Ellie, comes out to Ellie early in the book, and later comes out to his friend Iris. Neither girl believes this means something is wrong with Kevin, and when he appears to have been seduced by a woman later in the novel, both Ellie and Iris believe that this is an indication that Kevin is not behaving like himself. They are not relieved that Kevin is expressing sexual interest in someone nor do they think that this means Kevin is “normal” after all. Rather, Kevin’s identity has been accepted by both girls so completely that they know he would not just suddenly become a sexual person, and this leads them to protect and defend Kevin from the woman.

The representations of asexuality are not exclusive to novels set in modern times. *The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy* (Lee, 2018) is set in the 18th century, with asexual protagonist Felicity as the narrator. Felicity never describes herself by using the word “asexual” nor does anyone else in her life, likely because such a term as applied to human sexual orientation would be anachronistic. Felicity does, however, describe kissing as “Just a thing people do” (p.317) and tells her brother that “I just don’t seem to desire that sort of relationship with anyone the way everyone else does” (p.396), meaning a sexual relationship. Felicity expresses asexual feelings, and may also be aromantic, and she worries that something is wrong with her because of this – which is something asexual people experience and therefore is an honest, and positive, representation. Only one character suggests to Felicity that she has not met the right person; the rest seem unbothered by Felicity’s asexuality, whether or not she has that name to use for her feelings.

Nix’s *Clariel* (2014) also features an asexual protagonist who does not have the word asexual to describe herself. The world of the book is a fantasy world completely unlike the world in which we live, and does not appear to have the words for any type of sexuality - no one is ever described as straight or gay or otherwise. Clariel, like Felicity, is clearly asexual despite not having that word at her disposal to describe herself. Twice Clariel thinks of her lack of desire towards men and women, and does not care if she ever has sex again after the first time she experiences it (Nix, 2014, p.12). This is the only representation of asexuality which seems indifferent to the concept entirely. Clariel’s asexuality is wondered at by her, but she never reveals it to anyone except her aunt, and then she only mentioned it once. Clariel seems to be distressed by her feelings and wonders what people will think about her, indicating that in this fantasy world, as in the real world, sexuality is expected of all people. In not offering any

positive attitudes toward asexuality (Clariel herself seems to think something is wrong with her), the book casts asexuality in a negative light even as it seems indifferent to the subject of sexuality entirely. Sexuality, and Clariel's asexuality, are clearly not the focus of the novel, but as they are included topics, it is disappointing that sexual attitudes in Clariel's world are not further explained and that Clariel receives no validation of her feelings as the asexual characters in the other novels receive.

Television

Only two television shows feature an asexual character: *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2018) and *Sirens* (2014-2015). Both of these television shows portray asexuality in a positive and honest way, and offer real looks at how people come to terms with either their own asexuality or with someone else's asexuality.

Sirens originally aired on USA Network and is now available to stream on Hulu, and follows a group of paramedics as they do their job and interact with one another. The character of Voodoo is revealed in episode six of season one to be asexual, when her coworker Brian is revealed to have a crush on her and is warned away from pursuing it. Brian struggles to accept Voodoo's asexuality because he does not understand it, and when he attempts to equate his current lack of sexual activity with her asexuality, Voodoo corrects him: "You can't get laid. I don't want to" ("The Finger", 2014). While Voodoo's asexuality is often joked about, her coworkers do not actually seem to think that anything is wrong with her, or that she is broken. When Brian asks questions, Voodoo answers them honestly and seems patient with his lack of understanding. Brian and Voodoo also discuss the concept of non-sexual intimacy, which is important to countering the idea that asexual people cannot or do not want to be intimate with others, and raises the idea that there are non-sexual forms of intimacy and connection. *Sirens* has

only 23 episodes, and of those, only four explicitly mention asexuality, indicating that the show does not think it is a “big deal” or something worth discussing every episode. No one tries to change Voodoo and only the new guy, Brian, has any issues with Voodoo – because he has never encountered asexuality before and does not understand it, not because he thinks it is wrong or bad.

BoJack Horseman (2014-2018) follows the life of the titular character, a washed-up television star with a bad attitude. In season three of the show, it is revealed that BoJack’s friend and (now former) roommate, Todd, is asexual – though Todd initially does not want to use that word to describe himself. In episode five of season three, Todd literally runs away from a girl who wants to have sex with him because he does not know how to turn her down or tell her that he does not want to have sex. Later, in the season finale, the girl Emily confronts him about seeming to like her but not wanting her, and Todd tells her that he does not think he is gay, or straight – he thinks he is “nothing.” This language is problematic, as is Todd’s refusal to be called asexual when Emily uses the term in season four’s first episode.

In seasons four and five, however, Todd slowly accepts the label asexual and begins to use it to identify himself. When he comes out to BoJack, he is met with acceptance and humor, although he is not in the mood for the humor. The show works to refute notions of asexuality that are untrue by using Todd’s asexual friend group (which he meets at an asexual meet-up) to explain things which Todd does not know. Two of the characters in the asexual group are revealed to be married to each other when Todd says that he knows it’s weird for asexuals to get married. When Todd gets asked on a date, he feels the need to say that he is asexual; and later, when that date turns into a relationship between two asexual people, Todd meets his girlfriend’s hyper-sexual family. This is played up for comedy’s sake, but eventually his girlfriend, Yolanda,

comes out to her family as asexual and they are more accepting than she believed they would be. This is also when Todd and Yolanda realize that they have nothing in common except the fact that they are both asexual, and that this is not a basis for a relationship.

Both of these television shows offer positive representations of asexuality, although only *BoJack Horseman* is still running. However, these are not representations that are necessarily widely accessible. *BoJack Horseman* is a Netflix original show, meaning it is only available on the streaming platform and people who do not have a Netflix subscription cannot watch it. *Sirens* was originally on USA Network, which is not a network automatically included in television provider subscriptions, and is now available on Hulu, a streaming service similar to Netflix. In both cases, regardless of a subscription or an account, an Internet connection is required to access either website at all.

Limitations

This study was limited to media available in the English language and which included explicit portrayals of asexuality. It looks only at a small portion of available novels reported to feature asexual characters and only includes books and shows which were confirmed through consumption of the media that asexual characters were present. Studies on asexuality, representation, and sexual orientation were limited to what was available through the Purchase College Library.

Conclusion

Asexuality and asexual people are being portrayed in some fiction, but not in all media available for consumption. The existing portrayals of asexual people in fiction are generally positive, and even work to increase understanding of asexuality and dispel myths about asexuality. However, existing portrayals are limited in multiple ways. The television shows

which feature asexual characters are available only on streaming services, to which not everyone has access. The fictional literature which features asexual characters is entirely in the genre of young adult fiction, which would prevent young children from seeing asexuality represented in their reading materials. Adults also may not read young adult literature, which means they, too, will not see asexuality represented in their reading materials. There have been no studies on the impact of asexual representation on the lives of asexual people or the people around them, but the study on bisexual representation suggests that increased honest, positive, and multi-dimensional representation of asexuality would be a benefit to asexual people and the larger community. Asexual representation is just as important as the representation of any minority group, and should be encouraged as representation of other minority groups is encouraged. Through asexual representation, people can be educated on asexuality and view asexual people as the perfectly ordinary, whole, and healthy people they are.

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