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Asexual Erasure Undone: A Short Literary History of Asexuality in 19th- to 20th-Century Literary Classics

by Savie Luce

Preface: The Political Discourses Behind Asexuality

The world often mistakes silence for contentment, thus overlooking the contention that exists among us. Silence becomes a vessel disguised as peacefulness, carrying with it all the unspoken injustices that occur on a daily basis; it's the leak in a large boat that no one thinks to look for until the ship has already begun to sink.

I, too, grew up in a quiet place.

It was a town where I was expected to unobtrusively accept the political discourses around me, either because I was too young to have a say in them or because—as I was so often told—it wasn't my place. In places like these where little is said about bothersome details, conversations about things like the LGBT+ community weren't discussed until they became an inconvenience to daily life (or to others that opposed it in the town's community). This is to say that, growing up, what we didn't talk about we didn't see. What we didn't see needn't be discussed, and so the vicious cycle continued.

I was eleven when I first heard the word 'gay', and it was used as an insult between two boys at my elementary school. I had no idea what it meant or why it was an insult, but I was of the understanding that it was a bad thing to be. I, for this reason, was scared to be associated with it. When children are exposed to language like this—coupled with a small community that has

delineated vocal discourse with something unpleasant—how are they to know any better? Moreover, who was the first person to introduce the word 'gay' to their son, congratulating its use as an insult without bothering to negotiate its core foundations? This is the importance of language in our daily lives; if no argument is made, there can be no rebuttal to defend such discourses.

I was sixteen when I first heard the term 'asexual'. It was being used in an argument by a high school teacher, who was attempting to discredit asexuality via her own social experiences. She said:

> "Everyone I've ever met who identified as asexual has, at one point or another, either had sex or changed their mind later. In fact, there's only one scenario that I can think of where a man was so adamant to prove his own asexuality that he surgically removed his own penis. He had it delivered to an adversary on a silver tray, like a dish."

Because of this, my first impressions of asexuality suggested that I would have to mutilate myself in order for my identity to be validated in the eyes of heteronormative society. I did not have the language or the reasoning to know otherwise. While I deeply resonated with asexuality on many levels, it wasn't presented positively in any of the spoken discourses or studies present in my social or academic life. Like the term 'gay', it became an invalidated insult meant to imply prudishness or physical deficit. It was a word given a reprise by someone else controlling the political discourses of my vocabulary, taking the term and redefining it to suit hypersexualized standards. I disagreed with what she had said but because of my lack of evidence, though I offered no opposition to what had been discussed. In a quiet town wherein rebuttal was the loudest noise of all, my silence implied a sort of resignation to those heteronormative ideals.

At the time, I was under the impression that I did not have enough evidence or language to refute these statements. And yet, examples of asexuality continued to present themselves everywhere, especially in books and films wherein I was told there were none. I read many novels and great epics wherein sensuality was assumed or implied when nonsexuality was all that was present, as romance became a sort of misguided indication of sexual behavior. Living within a hypersexual world disregarded these examples and my own asexuality, assuring me that perhaps one day I would be "mature enough" to understand while overlooking explicit examples of nonsexual behavior. Yet, in media and in social discourses people still continued to make claims about the "newness" of asexuality, accrediting this to recent technological advancements that allowed for a modern understanding of the word to blossom in an online platform (Tucker, *(A)sexual* 2011).

Just as romance had (allegedly) alluded to sexual activity in the literature I had read, the newness of asexual discussion began to produce many misconceptions about nonsexual behavior. Many confused it for chastity or celibacy, while others called it an excuse for prudishness. No matter how these ideas were confronted or refuted, it continued to be this 'new' idea that bounced between hypersexualized stereotypes while ignoring obvious examples that existed in literature prior to these technological advancements. To someone like me, who was both asexually queer and closeted, this erasure appeared almost deliberate. It was as if the heteronormative and hypersexualized society surrounding me had shut its eyes to the life I lived every day, trying to find new ways to undermine my identity by proposing regulations in the form of inquiries as a means to constrain asexual conduct. Those questions, designed to implement a sense of self-doubt, haunted me with every confrontation:

Would I still be asexual if I had sex? Would I still be asexual for considering trying sex? Can I be asexual and want love at the same time? Why would I, an asexual, pursue a relationship with someone who is not asexual? Moreover, if my feelings towards sexuality should change, was my asexuality valid at all? Did I have a place in the LGBT+ community without sex, or even at pride parades? As sex columnist Dan Savage notes in Angela Tucker's documentary *(A)sexual*:

> "It's funny to think about, you know. You've got the gays marching for the right to be cocksucking homosexuals and then you have the asexuals marching for the right to not do anything, which is hilarious. Like you didn't need to march for that right, you just needed to stay home and not do anything." (Tucker 2011)

Here, Savage asks the most damning question of all: why march for something that you already have a right to? Yet, the question overlooks the privilege of aligning with the hypersexualized nature of normative society, ignoring the consequences that many face when they fall outside of normative traditions.

I was almost twenty before I was able to put into words the nature of my own asexual identity: panromantic graysexual. In doing so, I was forced to face each and every one of these questions, to offer some defense and hope it would be enough. It has become a substantial part of my everyday life, as it continues to affect the way I digest and interpret literature, form romantic relationships, and posit a clear understanding of my own identity. The most frustrating part of all of this was that I saw examples of nonsexuality in almost every reading I'd been assigned in my secondary school experiences, and for all of my silent tolerances I wanted nothing more than to illustrate how the evidence people seemed to be looking for—true examples of asexual behavior prior to the modern era—were all right there.

They called it by different names, sometimes even mistaking it for friendship or homosexuality, but they continued to promote asexual narratives while undermining my own asexual identity. It's been present without the language available to describe it, and it exists even when rebuttals are not being made in its defence. This analysis is the beginning of a conversation designed to illustrate the asexual individual when heteronormative ideals suggest otherwise. It starts here, no longer silent or passive about the stereotypes that asexuality faces in the literary world.

Introduction: Beginning an Asexual Analysis

The historical necessity for a reevaluation of asexuality in its modern definition is mandated through examples of the asexual in between the 19th and 20th-centuries, wherein the term was first coined. As the word, and the asexual spectrum, was repurposed to describe the nuances of the nonsexual behavior, it has been historically overlooked due to erotonormative customs that suppose allosexuality prior to asexual intimacy. Here, the term erotonormative is used to define heteronormative customs surrounding sexuality, placing emphasis on the stereotyped assumption of sexuality prior to any nonsexual behavior. Likewise, the term allosexual is used to describe any persons or characters who regularly experience sexual attraction. Many assume that the word (as well as its modern definition) is the result of technological advancements that have made global communication more easily accessible and effective. However, this is merely one of a plethora of other erotonormative assumptions about the asexual spectrum that will be undone through an asexual analysis of the literary classics of the 19th and 20th-centuries.

By focusing on the home or setting of the characters in question, asexuality will present itself through discourses that ignore allosexual stereotypes, privileging the objective evaluation of queerplatonic discourses through the opposition of erotonormative archetypes. These analyses will also take into consideration the differences between romantic intention and sexual attraction, highlighting the differences as a means of illustrating the broadness of the asexual spectrum. Asexual representation is not a method of proscribed behaviors assumed to be sanitized of sex or companionship, but a reflection of the nuance and gray that is present in the spectrum. By highlighting these complexities within works such as Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Alan Dale's *A Marriage Below Zero,* Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman's "Two Friends", and Kate

Chopin's *The Awakening*, the asexual erasure between these 19th and 20th-century classics can be undone from each narrative.

Without definition, asexuality was without recognition as a bonafide sexual orientation prior to the 21st-century. When coupled with the lack of technological advancement, which was responsible for most of the conversation surrounding asexuality at the start of the 21st-century, many of the processes necessary in recognizing asexuality within individuals before the modern era were greatly hindered. This, when combined with a rise in technological advancement — which helped with the reassignment of the term—has left many under the impression that asexuality is a new-age idea of sexuality. Due to its lack of recognition and improper reassignment of terminology, many assumed that either it must not have existed before the rise in technological advancements or that it is only present in young adults (Decker 68). In a time without proper language to associate many of the subsets and characteristics associated with asexuality, there simply wasn't language available to define the sexual orientation preceding these instances. This is not to say that examples of asexuality did not exist until the 21st-century as the word began to gain traction, but that the language available to prescribe an accurate understanding of this behavior was often confused asexuality with another, less accurate term instead.

While the nationality of the novels and short stories may not affect how the asexual analysis of the texts is conducted, the renowned nature of the classics permits a general assumption that—as the texts are well-known in academic study—many have either heard of or read the texts. Without the proper language to describe or expose asexual relationships in these works, they have been historically subjected to erasure and misinterpretation as they were reexamined via social norms that privilege erotonormativity, or the hypersexual discourses of

heteronormative society. As Elizabeth Hanna Hanson notes in her essay "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure", sexual attraction has evolved to become a "universal and uniform" presupposition in society that she refers to as erotonormativity (345). Erotonormativity first assumes allosexuality, the definition used to describe people who experience sexual attraction, and therefore privileges this above asexual supposition (see Hille). Moreover, it assumes that other examples of allosexuality (such as homosexuality or lesbianism) are more likely than asexual outcomes.

Asexual relationships are commonly mistaken or mislabeled today as simply queer, heteronormative (when the participants are of opposite sexes), or celibate when the reality of their content is devoid of any sexual interest or desire. Without personal understanding or insight into the relationship, it can be easy to misinterpret things like this. In absence of proper identifiers, it becomes even harder to assess the true nature of the relationship, if there is one. Such can be said for the literary texts analyzed in the following segment of this project. As will be demonstrated in this project, the omission of erotonormative stereotypes and added prominence on the physical location of housing illustrates nonsexual behavior. Until proven allosexual, allosexuality will not take precedence over asexual assumption.

By proving that these renowned texts can contain examples of asexual relationships prior to the modern redefinition of the term, it is possible to undo the historical erasure that the absence of such language has caused. This change in perspective, an asexual analysis of these texts using the modern understanding of the term, allows for new relationships and information to be derived from work that has been studied for centuries, exposing the possibility that asexuality exists as freely and naturally in literature as it does in day-to-day life.

Words without definition often lack presence in literary and historical recognition, and the same can be said for asexuality. By reestablishing a definition for it—as without definition, the historical erasure of the subject is to be expected—asexual recognition becomes easier to recognize in literature. Definitions are beneficial in this way, as they align with various explanations for specific types of behavior (especially those that often defy social expectations). This sort of concept is discussed in depth by philosophers such as Michel Foucault, who critiques the process of definition as one that constricts any literary concept it attempts to explain (62). However, the creation of a word also implies the constraint of its mobility in our social lives. As was noted in his book, *The History of Sexuality*, the creation of a word—especially when that word has connotations towards sexuality—is parallel to the confession of its significance (Foucault 59). It is a confession that creates an awareness of the term in question that resonates in significance as much as if a person were to come out[1]. In this way, while confession announces a set of social regulations by which a person might identify themselves, their confession creates and utilizes the language necessary to carry on modes of analysis in a literary mode. As Foucault wrote: "One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else, the things people write books about" (59). To write books—to start a literary conversation—one needs the language to do so. And to have language, one needs to define it.

The definition of asexuality came about in the 18th-century, defining the term as an organism that reproduces without the need of another organism[2]. Though created to explain and

[1] The phrase "come out" refers to the process by which a non-heteronormative person might announce or confess their sexual or gender orientation.
[2] (www.etymonline.com)

further scientific data, the meaning of the word has shifted from a purely scientific standpoint to a socialized one, which mandates its redefinition in a modern context. From the late 20th-century onwards, the modern use of the word describes a sexual orientation, not the processes of reproduction in an organism (Mollet 78). However, this is a rudimentary start for defining the term as a whole, as Ela Przybylo notes in her book *Asexual Erotics* that nonsexuality serves as a better way to define the term, as "it helps make sense of the ways that various articulations and iterations of low sexual desire and sexual absence, although they have always existed, (as they) have not always been nameable as 'asexuality' or coalesced under an identity of asexuality that has subjective meaning for those who use it" (29). Shifting from a focus on what is lacking in sexuality suggests that there is a defect in asexual behavior, as it privileges and normalizes allosexual behavior while negating (Przybylo 4). By this, one can defer away from a generic and overly simplified definition—which focuses on what is lacking in a person—by reflecting on what is avoided or preferred within any one person. The use of the term 'nonsexual' detracts from the overly sexualized norms of heteronormative society, exposing how hypersexualization has become a socialized expectation while also avoiding any accusation of 'lacking' or 'debilitation' in an individual.

Normativity in any form creates a predisposition in social understanding, which implies a lack of general curiosity in the matter. The supposition of heteronormativity proposes an understanding that without confrontation to the normative order, there will be a lack of educational or academic representation on the subject (Hanson 344). As she states in her essay:

> This neglect is symptomatic of a wider cultural propensity toward asexual erasure. We are disposed to deal with absences of any kind by installing content in them in order to

> recuperate them as presences—a process which can make asexuality difficult to articulate, and conversely, the only means by which it *can* be articulated. (344)

Affirming both what Ela Przybylo and Hanson suggest when they exploit the lack of asexual representation in academic literature and education: any vacancy of conversation only impedes social ability to advocate for the subject in question. By creating a sense of normativity around this lack of dialogue—through the suggestion that there is no other dialogue to be had—academia has formed a stunt in asexual understanding prior to the solidification of the term's definition.

As a sexual orientation, much of asexual visibility is accredited to recent technological advancements made at the end of the 20th-century, as the birth of the internet enabled social media platforms to expand communicative efforts between more people across the globe (Decker 68). Be that as it may, much of the misinformation about asexuality begins with the misdirection of information based on assumption. From the creation of the term 'asexual' in the 18th-century, as it was used to define asexual reproduction, asexuality has transcended its original definition and grown to encompass a whole new genre of literature that wasn't properly redefined until the early 21st-century[3]. Those brief centuries were the predecessors of an entire branch of literature for the LGBTQ+ community that has been otherwise camouflaged in erasure. This is not to say that asexual relationships did not exist or were not present in the literary prior to the 19th-century, but that the repurposed language to make such discussion possible had been otherwise absent before that timeline[4].

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[3](www.etymonline.com)
[4](www.etymonline.com)

Given sources such as the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), an online platform designed to house conversations about asexuality, the technological movement following the end of the 20th-century has sparked more opportunities for others to discuss asexual preferences more clearly. As an article called "Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive", written by Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, states:

> Asexuality's existing archives can be usefully understood as circulating within two predominant bodies of thinking. The first, the scientific literature on asexuality, consolidates a truth archive. This expanding body of work, while politically significant for increasing asexual visibility, legibility, and legitimacy, also operates as the 'truth' of asexuality, as the proven fact. Crucially, the truth archive informs and is informed by asexuality's vernacular archive, that body of examples that is more fluid and changing, but that still capitulates, too often, to certain exclusionary mechanisms and parameters of exception. (300)

The validation, advancement, and history of sexuality is contingent upon articles that scientifically separate the biological processes from the socialized understanding of the word, illustrating that asexuality qualifies as a sexuality rather than a disability. This is what the authors refer to as the "truth archive" (300). By proxy, the vernacular archive contains texts and articles which embody the content of asexual conversation or fiction but that exist in the form of literature, online content, or blogs. AVEN is one such vernacular archive for asexual literature, furthering the contemporary definition of the term through an online platform (Przybylo and Cooper 300). This terminology is necessary and vital in differentiating potential archives for asexual resources, illustrating how both archives are contingent on the modern century, though it creates a predicament for asexual literature prior to the 21st-century. In order to source out

examples of asexual relationships in 19th to 20th-century literature, older literary texts must be sourced out as though they are a part of the vernacular archive, whose fluidity is supported and benefitted by the truth archive mentioned in Przybylo and Cooper's article (300).

Structuring an Asexual Narrative

In each of the following chapters of this project, the various facets of asexuality will begin with a detailed description and illustration of nonsexual behavior as it combats allosexual expectation in a literary context. Woven into the subsections of each chapter will be the literary analyses of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Alan Dale's *A Marriage Below Zero,* Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman's short story "Two Friends", and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, supporting the chapters with illustrations of the asexual behavior provided by each independent literary classic. As the methodology of asexual analysis relies heavily on the removal of erotonormative assumptions from these literary classics, Chapter 1: Undressing Erotonormative Stereotypes will begin this analysis through the exemplification of the social norms that camouflage nonsexual behavior within these works of literature. Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* will occupy the first subsection, illustrating the complex relationship between allosexual norms, masculinity, and disability while also highlighting the constant scenery shift within the novel.

Chapter 2: The Asexual Spectrum will follow by expanding the archive of terminology available for asexual behavior, furthering this project's ability to identify nonsexual relationships in the literature present through the development of varying projections of asexuality that often interact with sex. In doing so, this chapter confronts the sanitized ideas of the asexual spectrum while also validating a nonsexual relationship with the act of sex. Thus, the following subsection

of Alan Dale's *A Marriage Below Zero* will provide concrete examples of the terminology provided. Nevertheless, rather than moving on to a different topic of conversation, Chapter 2: The Asexual Spectrum will continue into a different subsection following this analysis of Alan Dale's text, discussing the various synonyms available for asexuality that are often misdiagnosed as homosexuality or friendship as a result of erotonormative assumptions. These synonyms will then be instantiated in the final subsection of this chapter devoted to Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman's short story "Two Friends".

The final chapter of this project, Chapter 3: The Demi Rhetoric, will bring into discussion the relationship between romance and asexuality as it arises in literature. This chapter complicates the relationship between attraction and the asexual spectrum through the proposal that though not all romantic interests allude to sexual ones, those which exemplify a consistent relationship with sex might not either. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is instrumental to the illustration of this relationship, as it will project the development of an asexual identity through her complex emotional and romantic relationships with others. As a result, asexuality does not typify itself through isolating behavior, but by defying social norms that privilege the individual.

Chapter 1: Undressing Erotonormative Stereotypes

Before the reassignment of the definition of the term 'asexual' from its scientific roots to its references as a sexual orientation, this concept was without proper definition and context for an unprecedented period of time. This shift in language—from biological science to sexual preference—exposes the provision of definition and the reassignment of that definition is as effective as relocating the absence of one. As Michel Foucault notes within his book, *The History of Sexuality*:

> It is often said that we have been incapable of imagining any new pleasures. We have at least invented a different kind of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding in it in secret, of luring it out in the open—specific pleasure of the true discourse of pleasure. (71)

This quote makes note of the lack of vocabulary surrounding the asexual vernacular archive prior to the 21st-century adaptation of the word into a vehicle designed to describe nonsexuality, thereby suggesting that the application of modern definitions to older subjects and literary works will be able to uncover examples or situations of asexuality that were misinterpreted as cases of prudishness, asocialness, or celibacy within the characters in focus. Such things are often modern stereotypes that misinform others of asexuality. Rumors or notions like those mentioned are designed to discredit the person identifying as asexual. Moreover, the claim of asexuality is one that is constantly confronted as it develops or evolves within a person or character. Certain social expectations are assumed and continuously challenged after asexuality has made itself known, which scrutinizes all other relationships—sexual or asexual—between the individual and others.

For example, should a person use asexuality as a reason to avoid sexual interactions, one might assume that the statement is a false claim designed to disguise prudishness. This assumption is often incited by a general erasure of asexual behavior by mistaking it for chastity and the demonization of celibate behavior.

This project takes care to distinguish the terms ‘asexual’ and ‘celibate’ carefully, as the latter of the two suggests that nonsexual behavior arises out of choice rather than orientation. Ela Przybylo takes care to recognize the distinctions between the two, as she makes reference to the feminist history behind asexuality (44). Celibacy, unlike asexuality, is a constant choice made by an individual to maintain nonsexual activity, typically for the benefit of the practitioner (Przybylo 39). Oftentimes, celibate individuals actually express both desire and sexual attraction towards others while engaging in celibacy, as will be noted in Ela Przybylo’s book that this is often “a ‘misinterpretation of asexuality as the honorable achievement or performance of sexual restraint’” (104). In actuality, celibacy is the withholding of sex or sensual urges out of personal choice or, as is seen in the history of asexuality as it appears in political discourses, as a result of social or political boycotting (Przybylo 44). This was referred to as political asexuality in the early 1960s (Przybylo 39). As a gendered movement throughout the 1960s and 1970’s, this movement encouraged women to boycott sexuality as a response to the systemic misogyny that confined—and in some ways, continues to confine—women. While it is admirable that the term ‘asexual’ here is serving a different literary definition than its predecessor, it is important to note that this understanding of asexuality is not the definition that will be utilized or analyzed in literature between 19th and 20th-century literature. This is because political asexuality is being used here as a synonym for celibacy; to say that the two are the same is to claim that asexual orientation is a conscious choice, making it less of a sexual orientation and more of a lifestyle.

Given this and the hypersexual nature of the modern era, it is not uncommon for asexual individuals to be accused or confused for celibate individuals invoking a period of chastity when the political discourse of the term suggests as much. To avoid stereotyped assumptions over the duration of this project, political asexuality will be recognized as a form of political celibacy that differs from the modern understanding of asexuality as a valid sexual orientation.

Given the lack of language available to describe asexuality at the time, this assumption is not an uncommon one. In much of the literature that will be analyzed in this project, the majority of the homoromantic relationships present were first accused of homosexuality as a means of explaining the intimate nature of these partnerships (or the lack thereof). In this way, many asexual characters can be easily misidentified as lesbian or gay, when the nonsexual nature of their relationship might suggest otherwise. Without language to properly distinguish terms such as ‘lesbian’ from ‘homoromantic’, asexual erasure in literature often appears as unconscious mislabeling rather than malicious censorship.

While the nature of asexuality can be both varied and complex, the method by which asexuality will be uncovered in literary fashion will confront the already present erotonormative and heteronormative stereotypes present within each assumption. By stripping away unjust normative assumptions that are designed to critique the nonsexual nature of asexuality, while placing emphasis on the local which contains or harbors such relationships, the romantic and emotional intimacies of an asexual or queerplatonic relationship will be given visibility even without the proper language to define the nature of such relationships. In doing so, it will be uncovered that asexuality does not appear complacent within narratives that are not overtly romantic, but furthers the plot and social relationships present within those narratives.

While scholars such as Elizabeth Hanna Hanson argue that asexuality would create a disjointed presence within the literary narrative, stating that the “stagnant” nature of asexuality will disrupt personal and social growth within a fictional setting, authors like Ela Przybylo combat such assumptions by illustrating how asexuality promotes growth and expansion rather than confinement (103). Hanson states in her essay "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure": "Asexuality, as the nonexperience of sexual attraction, has no object, no aim, no tendency toward movement in any direction, which is precisely what makes the asexual possibility so disruptive in narrative" (350). The author states blatantly that she prefers to correlate asexuality structurally with stasis as it disrupts the general pace or movement of the surrounding narrative (349). However, her understanding of asexuality as devoid of motion or intention reduces asexuality past its most basic component: humanity. Asexuality, just like any other sexual orientation, cannot exist separate from the human condition. While it is true that, by itself, asexuality is incapable of having aim or motive, people and fictional characters almost certainly do. The use of the word ‘stasis’ conforms to a stereotype perpetuated by erotonormative society, invoking the idea that heteronormative society moves forward with allosexuality. Due to the fact that asexuality is often mistaken for the lack of sexuality, this idea creates the impression that these individuals are at a social standstill in comparison to their peers.

The hypocrisy in these stereotypes remains in how sexuality is presented to the youth. Ela Przybylo confronts this matter within a chapter of her book *Asexual Erotics* called “Growing into Asexuality”, wherein she mentions that:

> Ironically, even while childhood is desexualized, and sexual education tends to erase sexuality out of curricula, there is a hidden curriculum, which takes for granted that children will transform into sexual adults. Expectations that adults will grow into being

> sexual—that is, grow into being interested in sex and propelled by sexual desire—are grounded in the ideas about the naturalness of sexuality… In other words, the 'straightening effects' that take place in childhood and youth are entangled in a developmental narrative that sees sexuality as its end goal, even while sanitizing sexual expression along the way. (93)

In stating this, the text highlights the sanitization of sexuality from academic and social curriculums as it leaves both people and characters alike no choice but to grow into their own sexual identities, as the stagnant nature of sexuality presents itself in education as hyposexual while adopting hypersexual expectations (Przybylo 96). In this way, asexuality—just like homosexuality and heterosexuality—becomes a thing to grow into as well, as the term does not allude to a lack of sexuality but the nonsexual nature of their attractions to others. Because the definition of asexuality within this project does not define asexuality through what it is lacking, there is nothing to lose or to stagnate the presence of asexuality in any social or literary contexts. To conduct an asexual analysis of certain characters, defining asexuality through their relationships in a literary narrative, it will not be necessary to observe or exploit how such characters disjoint the narrative but rather how their presence or opposition in the text better defines them by pushing forward their independence and identification of self. In this way, the stereotyped stasis of asexual behavior will not be used to detect examples of asexuality, but rather a rejection of the erotonormativity that subdues introspective growth or change (which can be seen as acceptance) within some characters of a literary narrative. To be plain, given that asexuality is expressed by how a nonsexual person grows into and adapts to their sexuality, this change will affect and transform the literary narratives of each and every character included in

this project's analysis. To do so, the erotonormative stereotypes must be stripped from the analysis, which will be focused on the setting which contains the character's narrative.

In first supposing that allosexuality is a fallacy without further textual evidence, this analysis will illustrate how deeply erotonormativity relies on these stereotyped assumptions. To remove erotonormative assumptions from a literary narrative—as they first perceive a relationship or pairing to be inherently sexual—the opposite must be done with each character and relationship in the novels and short stories discussed. Therefore, until some sort of sexual attraction is explicitly stated or exemplified within each text, the assumption posited will be that there is none. As these observations will be based around the home or setting that each character resides in, the space which houses their close or intimate relationships will be scrutinized for the explicit sexual conduct that erotonormativity assumes.

The image of a home signifies the independence of an individual; in an asexual narrative, the people included in this setting, whether it be mobile or not, should be kept under careful consideration in an analysis, as the home literally and symbolically draws space between social norms, civic obligations, and their own values. The space through which an asexual person grows and changes is transformative in a literary narrative. A great deal of asexual terminology revolves around where the people or characters reside, using the image of shared space to represent commitment in the place of erotonormative standards.

When the space housing these erotornormative stereotypes combats social transition, the relationship between oneself and any underlying preferences becomes clearer to distinguish. One such stereotype that often combats medical and social discourses in this way is the suggestion that asexuality is a mental or physical disability or something caused by disability. Such

statements reduce asexual behavior to a treatable disorder which can be remedied. In positing this idea, erotonormativity becomes a clinical problem to be corrected by society, privileging the erotization of normative behavior while also proposing a hazardous deficit in nonsexuality. However, as will be discussed in the following section analyzing the asexual nature of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, a very real example of physical disability is used to proactively develop an asexual narrative that supports the idea that sexuality is fluid and independent of physical condition, whilst also negotiating the hazards of nonsexuality.

From Impotence to Asexuality in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*

Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) demonstrates the fluidity of sexuality, as Jake Barnes exemplifies the process through which one subverts erotonormative expectations by being physically unable to conform to them, as a physical injury from his service in war prevents him from consummating any relationship. Through the discourses offered by Ela Przybylo in her book, *Asexual Erotics* and her essay "Masculine Doubt and Sexual Wonder: Asexually-Identified Men Talk About Their (A)sexualities", the consequences of asexual fluidity in conjunction with intersectional disability prompts a heteronormative critique of this transition as it begins to oppose those erotonormative ideals. This leads to the fetishization of the asexual entity seen within Jake, as is discussed within Karli Cernakowski's essay, "Spectacular Asexuals: Media Visibility and Cultural Fetish". In addition to this, the emphasis placed on constant movement and travel within the novel's narrative thus dissociates the character from being able to ground his identity or home in one space while placing attention on key figures that keep acquaintances with him despite this constant state of motion. His transition from impotence to asexuality arises in the heteroromantic relationship that deteriorates between himself and his love interest, Lady

Brett Ashley, as she begins pursuing other relationships to compensate for the lack of sexual attraction posed by Jake.

As the character of Jake Barnes struggles to come to terms with a wound he received while serving in the war—one which incapacitates his ability to have or initiate sex—his relationship with one Lady Brett changes dramatically due to the lack of sexual content between them. As Lady Brett's adamant promiscuity demands the heteronormative reciprocation of sexual interest in her suitors, of which Jake was previously one, his inability to adhere to those erotonormative regimens rejects these constructs in an indisputable fashion. As she rejects his advances following the accident, Jake continues to pine for Lady Brett despite his condition; his advances appear entirely romantic, with some emphasis placed on intimate closeness such as kissing and cuddling (Hemingway 26). While his physical disability prevents him from being able to reconcile his relationship with her (which can only be done physically and via sex), his asexuality merely becomes a more dominant and noticeable presence in their relationship following the accident which made him sexually inept. Such can be seen in this section of the text, wherein Jake states to Lady Brett: "'...What happened to me is supposed to be funny. I never think about it'" (Hemingway 26).

Though his condition suggests that his asexuality is thoroughly clinical, the narrative of the novel treats Jake Barnes's impotence as a defining characteristic of his construct; it is something he must grow into and accept, demonstrating the fluidity of sexuality in a medicinal way. As Julie Decker notes in her book *The Invisible Orientation*:

> Sometimes disabilities and health conditions can affect or be related to the lack of libido, lack of interest in sex, or lack of passion for or ability to engage in sex, but if this is the case for a person who self-describes as asexual, there is really no practical reason to say

> that person's experience of asexuality is less legitimate. Everyone is affected by their physical existence, and *asexual* is what we call someone who isn't experiencing sexual attraction to others, regardless of *why*. (Decker 80)

Here, the same logic can be applied to the case of Jake Barnes, with the exception of his self-proclaimed asexuality. Given that the modern understanding of the term 'asexual' hadn't been solidified during the 20th-century period that *The Sun Also Rises* was published, such a statement would have been impossible. Moreover, there is no need to illustrate the absence of Jake's sexual attraction towards Lady Brett, as the lack of reciprocation towards her sexual advances (due to this hindrance) maintain his romantic attraction towards her, despite their sexual incompatibility, wherein Jake does not lament his inability to have sex with her, but her rejection of their romantic compatibility in response to his asexual condition.

As the subject of Jake's injury—or lack of sexual ability—is discussed very little, the plot of *The Sun Also Rises* accentuates the romantic and platonic relationships taking place between Jake and other characters. Though Lady Brett's physical attraction to men perpetuates her interest in Jake, his interest in her is maintained through their constant emotional and romantic semantics. For this reason, there is a narrative push towards romantic intention with an unrequited commitment due to the lack of sexual compatibility between Jake and his romantic interest. The differences between romantic and sexual attraction within Jake Barnes emerge out of necessity, as sexuality is no longer a heteronormative choice available to him. Ergo, the heteroromantic attraction Jake exhibits towards Lady Brett is highlighted through the injury that renders him nonsexual (medicinally influencing his asexual nature). Subsequently, the fluidity of his sexuality illustrates itself, creating a correlated relationship between the war-wound and his

current sexual identity as it results in an intersectional asexual entity. As Ela Przybylo notes in her book, *Asexual Erotics*:

> Broadening the archive around asexuality involves thinking about asexuality intersectionality, questioning why asexuality can only "count" if it is a born-this-way type of sexual orientation, allowing for (a)sexual fluidity over the lifespan, and focusing on queer and feminist representations of asexuality in particular (15).

Keeping this in mind, the intersectional relationship that forms is a combination of Jake Barnes's disability with his newfound asexual orientation, as it places more emphasis on his heteroromantic desire to be with the character of Lady Brett. However, she chooses not to commit to their relationship forthrightly—or the potential relationship—given his inability to reciprocate her sexual advances.

While Jake's attitude and general emotional compatibility with Lady Brett are unchanged, this change in his physical selection creates a tension between the two that is constantly pressured by Lady Brett through her heightened focus on sex. However, this is perplexed by the fact that Jake does not explicitly lament his inability to have sex with her, nor his sudden lack of sexual attraction, but rather that their relationship isn't sufficiently satisfactory within the nonsexual limits it has been confined to; while he demonstrates a desire for closeness and intimacy, Jake never overtly declares a desire to have started—or to maintain—a sexual relationship with her (Hemingway 26). In response to Lady Brett's desires, Jake even notes: "I never used to realize it, I guess[5]. I try and play it along and not make trouble for people. I probably never would have had any trouble if I hadn't run into Brett… I suppose she only wanted what she couldn't have. Well, people were that way… The Catholic Church had an

[5] His war wound.

awfully good way of handling all that. Good advice, anyway. Not to think about it" (Hemingway 31).

Lady Brett's attraction to Jake in this way is fetishizing his asexual nature, creating a compulsory romantic friendship with him while acknowledging that his sexuality is no longer aligned with hers. Moreover, her monogamous views of romantic relationships limit her ability to compromise or negotiate with his newfound asexuality (Hemingway 31). This is touched on by Karli Cerankowski as well in her essay "Spectacular Asexuals: Media Visibility and Cultural Fetish", wherein she states: "Fixation is fixed on the body in order to make that body into the same and the familiar. There is a demand to know the details of the sexual workings and experiences of that body precisely to place sex and sexual desire onto the body that resists it." In representing Jake's character like this, "the asexual body becomes a thing to be conquered" (Cerankowski 146).

The dissonance instigated between both Jake and Lady Breton arises through a show of sexual incompatibility, and as a result, critiques Jake's masculinity through a show of what part sexual attraction plays in his normative lifestyle. As is noted in Ela Przybylo's essay, "Masculine Doubt and Sexual Wonder: Asexually-Identified Men Talk About Their (A)sexualites":

> Manliness is thus ultimately bound up with not only having sex but also with ostentatiously performing an interest in sex when among other men…
>
> The participants thus draw a direct connection between sex, sexual performance, and what it means to be a man. (232-233)

This section of the text highlights how the cultural discourses segregate the gendered constructs which inform erotonormative expectations. Though Jake was previously informed by those erotonormative standards, his newfound position as an asexual entity provokes the fetishization

of his sexual impotence through the criticism of his own manhood. Moreover, the implication that a structured sense of his masculinity is dependent on sexual performance creates a goal-oriented perspective of sex that is predominantly furthered by erotonormative standards (Przybylo 234).

By linking the discourses of romantic and sexual tension between the two through the focus of how the two follow one another throughout the narrative of the novel, the distance that these characters fail to put between them only heightens the romantic, though nonsexual relationship they share (on account of Jake's asexuality). Given the unlocalized nature of the narrative—as the plot takes place in a number of countries, hotels, and estates—the nonsexual nature of the plot is accentuated through the chase situated between Jake and Lady Brett. Though Book 1 of *The Sun Also Rises* takes place primarily in Paris, France, the second book within the novel is situated within Pamplona, Spain. While the two are not explicitly together during the entirety of this journey, they follow one another from place to place, oftentimes only journeying at the recommendation of the other (Hemingway 82).

The two follow one another from vacation to vacation, primarily journeying to various cities and resorts in Spain. Ironically, though the two try—and fail—to maintain a non-romantic friendship, their social discourses force them to constantly be within the conjoined spaces that the two always seem to find themselves within. Moreover, despite the monogamous and non-compromising nature of Lady Brett's romantic and sexual discourses, her involvement with several other characters does not detract from the physical as well as the emotional closeness she shares with Jake (Hemingway 31). The lack of commitment illustrated between the two furthers with each change in scenery, as the transnational scenery of the narrative does not deter the two from maintaining the romantic attachment the two have. By placing emphasis on the fact that

each of these suitors, Jake included, are bound together by civil and social discourses as opposed to literal housing (and by proxy, the financial constraints that accompany those housing developments), the narrative places focus on the intimate connection between Jake and Lady Brett through the suggestion that no matter the location, their romantic connection (as well as their nonsexual one) would bring the two together through the sheer force of their attraction to one another. This discourse is commented upon freely by Jake himself, who states that, "'You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another. There's nothing to that'" (Hemingway 11). While in some respects this refers to his relationship with Lady Brett, this also draws attention to Jake's newfound asexual identity and its unchanging—though nevertheless correlated—relationship with travel.

Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* posits a nonsexual discourse that subverts both erotonormative and heteronormative expectations by implementing an intersectional narrative within Jake Barnes that is both disabled and asexual. As both Ela Przybylo's book *Asexual Erotics* and essay "Masculine Doubt and Sexual Wonder: Asexually-Identified Men Talk About Their (A)sexualities" note, the combination of these attributes draws attentions to the masculine ideals upheld by such norm—which comment on Jake's masculinity—thusly leading to the fetishization of the asexual narrative discussed within Karli Cerankowski's essay, "Spectacular Asexuals: Media Visibility and Cultural Fetish". As the two characters find themselves bound to one another through their constant struggle with romantic compatibility (as it is countered by sexual incompatibility), the ever-changing scenery of the plot highlights the social discourses which bind the two together through their attraction. Though incompatible, the war between romantic intention and sexual ability persists within a nonsexual narrative that illustrates the most tenacious aspects of the asexual identity: fluidity does not imply

changeability, though this is a common misconception of erotonormative ideals.

Chapter 2: The Asexual Spectrum

The importance of defining asexuality in terms of its nonsexual nature is exemplified in what is present within a literary narrative, in that detracts from erotonormativity while also emphasizing the romantic or social interactions within a narrative, as Ela Przybylo notes within *Asexual Erotics* that "by using the language of 'sexual attraction,' asexuality is granted visibility alongside other sexual orientations that likewise pivot the criterion of 'sexual attraction'" (4). However, the spectrum of sexuality is nuanced and not always devoid of sexual content. By this, the term 'asexual' becomes a spectrum which is full of "gray areas" (Decker 35). Best noted in the introductory sections of the book:

> For some people, sexual identity is very simple. It fits easily into well-defined boxes and is uncomplicated to describe. It's not confusing to experience because it's common and well represented in culture and media; it's easy to know what to look for in a partner, the sorts of sexual experiences the relationship might lead to are predictable.
>
> But gray areas exist in all orientations. (35)

Such gray is often found in asexuality, a variance which does not invalidate the term but rather expands upon the spectrum of asexual orientation. Terms which are often associated with or included under the spectrum of asexuality are gray-asexuality and demisexuality. Gray-asexuality, also referred to as graysexuality, is used to describe individuals who "primarily live with an asexual experience of the world, but can experience or have experienced sexual attraction and wish to acknowledge it in their label" (Decker 36). This is a more complex understanding of asexuality, as it implies a certain amount of inconsistency in terms of how a

person relates to the concept of sexual desire. Typically, this is defined by the specifics of a person's relationship with attraction, varying from (but not limited to) the following examples:

- They feel sexual attraction, but it is weak
- They go through phases of feeling sexual attraction and phases of not feeling it
- They feel attractions but are unsure of whether they are sexual attractions
- They get caught up in another person's sexual desire and enjoy it vicariously but don't feel it intrinsically
- They only find a tiny sliver of the population sexually attractive
- They find people sexy but have no attraction to them[6]
- They find people sexy but have no physical reaction to them
- They find people sexy but are unable or unwilling to pursue someone as a partner (Decker 37)

It is crucial to note that in each of these examples wherein sexual attraction or desire is present, its inconsistency or scarceness is what proposes its asexual relationship to the individual. Of course, as is wont with any person, declaring—or as Foucault would state, confessing—a sexual orientation is an introspective action which can only be determined by the individual in question. Within the literature, this suggests that any and all literature which outlines a relationship relating to asexuality might not be featured in the traditional sense of the word. The division of sensuality and romanticism are clearly outlined, distinguishing yet another gray element of asexuality: how romanticism rejects the implication of sexual content.

[6] This is also known as 'aesthetic attraction' (Decker 6).

This divergence between romanticism and overt sensuality creates a variety of other labels often found in the gray areas of asexuality. As Decker notes in her book, “some people misinterpret aesthetic appreciation, romantic attraction, or sexual arousal for sexual attraction”, highlighting another common misconception of sexuality: that romantic orientation coincides with sexual attraction (6). In this way, a person with heteroromantic interest—or who is romantically interested in those of the opposite sex—should not be presumed to also be heterosexual. It can be perfectly plausible for someone who is heteroromantic to be asexual, as it is common to combine the two orientation descriptors (Decker 36). These romantic descriptors are commonly used by an individual to distinguish the nature of their romantic pursuits—of any—when that individual also identifies with a label on the asexual spectrum.

Other romantic terms commonly used in reference to this are: homoromantic, biromantic, polyromantic, panromantic, grayromantic, demiromantic, and aromantic. Homoromanticism is used to describe an individual who is romantically attracted to those of the same sex, while biromanticism is used to describe an individual attracted to at least two or more sexes. Polyromanticism describes a person attracted romantically to many sexes, while panromanticism refers to a person who can be romantically attracted to anyone, regardless of sex. As was discussed previously, the concept of ‘gray’ in any orientation implies a variance in how a person perceives or experiences some form of attraction. Likewise, a person who identifies with grayromanticism might only experience romantic attraction under very specific circumstances with a considerable amount of fluidity as to how or when this attraction might occur. Often, the term grayromanticism is further specified to include a preferred gender as well, such as the example of a gray-biromantic asexual individual. This can be used to describe someone who experiences grayromantic tendencies towards at least two sexes while on the asexual spectrum.

Aromanticism, however, differs from all aforementioned romantic orientations in that it is exempt from gendered preferences because of the type of romantic preference it describes. This is especially interesting, as a person does not need to identify as asexual to identify with aromanticism. To identify as aromantic means that a person does not experience romantic attraction in any form, which can be referred to as nonromanticism. Nonetheless, this is not to imply that those of aromantic orientation do not or cannot seek out companionship. While the relationship formed varies considerably from the standard representation of modern erotonormativity, as Julie Decker notes in *The Asexual Orientation*, aromantic relationships tend to vary from the traditional literary representation of relationships in accordance to what they lack from romantic attraction (23-24). This is troubling, as it again defaults to asexual stereotypes which suggest that asexuality is the result of some sort of personal default. However, Decker does provide some valuable insight into aromantic relationships, as she describes one facet of such a relationship as defined by a closeness that "involves fulfilling participants' non-romantic needs" (24). This idea reinstates and combats the modern interpretation of social relationships, as it suggests that the basic needs of a person exceed and transcend emotional and physical requirements in coalition with their social rendezvous. This is sometimes referred to as queerplatonic, a term often used to describe a committed long-term relationship between two or more individuals that exceeds the descriptor of friendship by their proximity to one another (Decker 25). Nonetheless, Decker does not fail to illustrate some underlying issues with the term, as she writes:

> The word *queerplatonic* is sometimes controversial because some say there is nothing 'queer' about essentially having a best friend, but people in queerplatonic relationships may not feel comfortable describing their partnership as friendship, and their lifestyle is

> often mistaken for romantic from the outside. It is a platonic relationship, but it is 'queered' in some way—not friends, not romantic partners, but something else. Sometimes these partnerships focus on the partners' shared goals or compatibility in areas of their lives not related to emotional attraction. A relationship shouldn't be assigned a romantic status if participants say it is not romantic, even if it looks indistinguishable from romance when outside the equation. (25)

Of course, this complicates the process of illustrating aromantic relationships in the literature by tenfold. However, as will be illustrated in the following essay on Alan Dale's 19th-century novel, *A Marriage Below Zero*, the space which confines each asexual and allosexual relationship forces a narrative tension that furthers the literary plot in question. The irony within this statement relies on all efforts to adhere to erotonormative standards by the aromantic character in question, as she opposes the process of romantic conduct while maintaining performative romantic efforts throughout the course of the novel.

Knowing Ignorantly within Alen Dale's *A Marriage Below Zero*

As can be seen in Alen Dale's novel, *Marriage Below Zero*, as the characters of Elsie Bouverie and Arthur Ravener remain in a localized space—which is often quartered to limit the homosexual relationship taking place between Arthur and his companion, Captain Dillington—the separation that is drawn between the two accentuates their individual identities. Where their relationship struggles within a quartered setting, their own romantic and sexual identities illustrate themselves in the strain. Elsie's clear hetero-aromantic interests with Arthur are thus restricted by the methods she prescribes to fix his infidelity-orientated character. As neither are willing to compromise on the monogamous or nonmonogamous nature of their marriage, Elsie's

hetero-aromantic nature (which is sexually repulsed) seeks to confine Arthur's homoromantic and implied homosexual tendencies to her own asexual narrative.

Set in the late 19th-century Victorian society, Dale's *A Marriage Below Zero* places emphasis on the characters of Elsie and Arthur in their continual fight over spatial dominance. Though the two seemed to have wonderful verbal chemistry at the start of their relationship, from the moment the two are wed Arthur disregards Elsie completely for the brooding Captain Dillington. While it is commonly known throughout the novel that Arthur and Captain Dillington are in a homosexual relationship with one another, Elsie remains ignorant to this fact up until the very conclusion of the novel. Convinced that Arthur has been having an affair with another woman instead, she attempts to establish her home with Arthur by relocating and isolating him from Captain Dillington, thus reinstating a focus on location in defining her own asexual identity with Arthur.

Elsie's romantic attraction to Arthur Ravener is codependent on the compatible nature of their conversation, as she only admits her suspected attraction towards him after a long, intimate discussion about (ironically) the constraints of heteronormative society (Dale 20). The development of romantic and social interest in him resonates with demi-romantic definitions, as her interest in Arthur follows a constant set of nonsexual verbal interactions with his character. At the start of their friendship, Elsie is keen to note that her interest in others stems from a place of contempt for the standards of romantic interaction, as she notes: "'...A man must think very little of a girl to be constantly telling her that her cheeks are like roses, her eyes like stars, and her lips—Ah; I sicken to think of it'" (Dale 13). Moreover, the romantic attraction that she later expresses towards Arthur is very much rehearsed in the erotonormative constructs that Elsie initially seeks to avoid. This includes flirting, small talk, and most affectionate encounters (Dale

53). Such can be noted in various segments of the text wherein she practices or plans how to best flirt with him, “determined to impress Arthur Ravener favorably” (Dale 21). In this way, the text illustrates that it is not with genuine romantic attraction that she pursues Arthur as a spouse, but rather with the drive to adhere to erotonormative customs. It’s for these reasons that Elsie’s character aligns very well with an aromantic drive, as she initially feels a general romantic interest in Arthur but generally feels more satisfied by any potential friendships she may form (Decker 22).

At this point in the novel, though the two characters do not yet occupy the same space, Elsie’s intent to maintain close contact with and marry Arthur registers a change in verbal and physical behavior as a means of eventually occupying the same space, as it alters the course of their relationship together. Though “most would say a relationship becomes romantic when its participants cross a certain threshold of intimacy and access to each other’s lives”, this does not inherently suggest Elsie's attraction towards Arthur in any capacity (Decker 19). Instead, it alludes to her intention to develop their relationship into something more in response to the expectations set by erotonormative standards. However, from the moment the two are married, this romantic or intimate connection is severed between both Arthur and Elsie on account of his preoccupation with Captain Dillington. His affiliation with Captain Dillington draws him away from the space that both Elsie and Arthur now call their home, creating tension that exaggerates Elsie’s performative romantic advances.

While it can be posited that Arthur’s withdrawal from Elsie is a result of her childish sensibilities, it is important to note that “desexualization often gets misnamed as asexuality” (Przybylo 122). Many within the text indeed view her as childlike or innocent, as even Elsie refers to herself as childish on many occasions (Dale 13). Therefore, it is not the childish nature

fronted by the narrative that assumes asexual intention, but rather Elsie's response to this sudden lack of romantic affiliation with her newfound husband.

Though the two are occupying the same space—or house—the intimate nature of their relationship has not evolved as sufficiently as Elsie expected it to. As a result, the space intended to foster their relationship is one that traps the two within an uncompromising monogamous environment, as Elsie refutes any open-relationship suggested or hinted by Arthur as a means of satiating her need for companionship (Dale 81). While Arthur reminds her that, as she is the mistress of the house, she has both the freewill and right to invite over whomever she pleases, Elsie rejects the notion with a tone of defeat, taking issue with the sentiment that she "could never make her husband jealous" (Dale 82). In doing so, she limits herself to the romantically and platonically sanitized space that accentuates her performative erotonormative methodologies.

The subject of emphasizing their attraction to one another based on how quartered their lives have become only heightens Elsie's awareness that her husband no longer maintains any sort of constant interest or focus on her. While this is first exemplified through Elsie and Arthur's marriage to one another (causing them to live within the same estate), this is reiterated after Elsie insists on severing the bond between Arthur and Captain Dillington, thereby relocating her husband and herself to America for a short period (Dale 126). It is here that Elsie assumes dominance over spatial authority, he setting which confined the two with the intention of furthering their romantic or sexual relationship only succeeds in highlighting newfound facets of Elsie's aromantic asexual identity.

Convinced of some deficit within herself, "that (she) was not sufficiently attractive enough for him", it never occurs to Elsie to consider her individual attraction to Arthur's

character, which presents itself as subliminally repulsed in sexual (or overtly intimate) confrontation (Dale 65). Such can be observed within this section of the text:

> Arthur again took my hands in his. In his eyes, as he fixed them upon my face, I saw 'a something' that sent a thrill of ecstatic bliss through my heart. He leaned forward, and pressed a kiss—warm and tender—upon my lips—the first he had ever given voluntarily to me. I looked up.
>
> A cold shudder ran through my frame, a feeling of intense disgust seemed to permeate my soul. (Dale 67-68)

This general disinterest and disgust in sexual conduct becomes a common theme (on the part of Elsie) throughout the novel that is not limited to gender preferences, as Elsie plainly rebukes kisses of affection from her handmaiden as well (Dale 53). However, despite the erotonormative connotations attached to the principle of marriage in late 19th-century Victorian society, Elsie remains averse to all confrontational displays of sexual interest, exemplifying sexual repulsion within her own aromantic and asexual tendancies. Conversely, sex is utilized by Arthur at the conclusion of their marriage as a force to reclaim his close, intimate relationship with her. This opportunity is blatantly rejected on the part of Elsie, who flees the scene in mortification and fright (Dale 147). While this remains one of the first examples of Arthur's proclivity towards sexual attraction within the novel's narrative, it's this rejection of hypersexual ideals that illustrates the repulsion that partially propels Elsie's nonsexual behavior, facilitating the idea that perhaps her sudden disinterest in sexual activity was a result of genuine disgust or disinterest in the act.

Through the exploitation of erotonormative expectations in maritial conduct in Alan Dale's *A Marriage Below Zero*, Elsie Bouverie's aromantic asexual identity exaggerates the

performative nature of romantic and sexualized affairs through her expressed repulsion towards either forms of conduct. By negotiating both the spatial and social confines of their residency, Elsie further exposes her aromantic interest in Arthur with each attempt to further the erotonormative stereotypes surrounding them. In doing so, she has cursed herself to a perpetual cycle of ignorance, knowing full-well that her husband is lost to her at the hands of Captain Dillington, but never considering herself as a proponent for their disconnect.

Asexual Synonyms

Though the modern understanding of the term ‘asexual’ was not repurposed until the early 21s-century, there were other words and phrases used to—oftentimes offhandedly and unknowingly—refer to asexual situations prior to the modern definition of the term. Some of these terms and phrases included, but were certainly not limited to: Boston marriages, bedfellows, and the Lesbian Death Bed. Keeping in mind that many erotonormative assumptions about nonsexual behavior often mislabel asexuality as strictly homosexual or queer, the intersectional nature of these problems (as well as these terms) must be considered in the following asexual analysis.

To start, the term ‘Boston marriage’ is often used to describe a relationship between two women with a number of specific circumstances (Rothblum and Brehony 5). Firstly, in order to be considered a Boston marriage between the two, they must be living together independently from any male authority or financial supplication. Secondly, as is noted by Rothblum and Brehony in their book, the relationship between the two is “presumed to asexual (hence the name ‘Boston’ which probably referred to the Puritan and asexual nature of the relationship)” (5). Lastly, while the relationship between these women is assumed to have a nonsexual element to

it, the nature of their partnership is often portrayed as more than just platonic. Despite this, homoromantic and lesbian reiterations or intepretations are not uncommon in texts that contain Boston marriage relationships between women. When this happens, the Boston marriage is often associated with the phrase 'Lesbian Death Bed'. This phrase is used to describe the statistical decrease in sexual activity between lesbian couples once they have lived with one another in domesticity for some time, arising in the early 1980's after the publication of *American couples: Money, Work, Sex* (Przybylo 65). Its association with asexuality, therefore, is assumed through the lack of sexual activity, as both Rothblum and Brehony propose that asexuality becomes a byproduct of lesbianism here. The reasoning for this is grounded in the erotonormativity that accompanies most asexual stereotypes, as this source chooses to define 'Boston marriage' as the final result of a relationship after it has undergone the effects of the Lesbian Death Bed (Rothblum and Brehony 7). However, this erroneously assumes explicit sensuality within a social construct wherein there might not be any, forcing a hypersexualized narrative which assumes the identity of lesbian before asexuality. Once again, this is a continuation of the stereotype which erases asexual integrity through mislabeling, calling the relationship 'lesbian' when homoeroticism or queerplatonicness are more likely.

Ela Przybylo also notes how this portrayal of the Lesbian Death Bed affronts the hypersexualized nature of the lesbian definition, while problemizing asexual representation in literature and media alike (64). As she notes in *Asexual Erotics*, the Lesbian Death Bed perpeuates the stereotype that a lack of sexual activity becomes a deficit in relationships, demonizing concepts such as the Boston marriage in the process (64). Its association with asexuality abides by erotonormative stereotypesin its assumption that a Boston marriage must arise out of a sexualized lesbian relationship in order to "devolve" into an asexual state

(Rothblum and Brehony 7). This is why asexuality is often misinterpreted for lesbianism or homosexuality, as Ela Przybylo states: it is “an ignored but persistent tenet in lesbianism, and one that can furnish a fruitful critique of sex” once asexuality is viewed an an additive quality rather than a deficit in the Lesbian Death Bed (88).

There does exist a third term which predates the modern understanding of asexuality used in this project: bedfellow. Dating back to the 15th-century, this term is very similar in definition to that of the Boston marriage, as it relates to a close friendship—typically between roommates—issuing the implication that the two share a bed (etymonline.com). Notice here that the term ‘friendship’ is being used once again here to readdress asexual terminology. Much like how asexuality is mislabeled as gay or homoerotic, it is also frequently misunderstood as a sort of friendship based on its lack of sexual content. But unlike the noun ‘friendship’, the use of ‘bedfellow' in a close relationship implies an intimate connection not found in a typical friendship, often alluding to romantic or uniquely fond activities not found in a standard friendship. Differing from the definition of the Boston marriage, the term 'bedfellow' does not necessarily imply or mandate that the two people or characters involved need to live with one another to fall under its definition. However, like the Boston marriage, the term is more often associated first with homosexuality prior to asexuality due to the way the image of the bed has been sexualized by erotonormative society (Przybylo 78).

In this way, a bedfellow differs from a roommate in that the couple in question do not only share a home, but a bed as well. The image of the bed is desexualized within these asexual constructs. This is discussed in greater detail by Ela Przybylo in her book *Asexual Erotics*, wherein she states that “the bed, while referential to our most private moments—sleep, rest, pain, death, sex— has been a politically astute symbol in feminist and queer art especially” (78). She

also notes that "the bed, in short, is intimately entangled with not only sex but also a host of other life events and day-to-day practices as well as their political contexts" (Przybylo 78). Here, the text is identifying the relationship between the bed and the individual—or couple—while also exposing the sexual connotations or stereotyped erotonormative assumptions that come along with it (Przybylo 78). By exposing these assumptions, the image of the bed can be properly reassessed in absence of hypersexualized stereotypes. The bed, or the location of the bed, grounds the narrative in terms of who lives or resides within a close proximity to the character. In this way, the fundamental discussion of sexuality between two or more individuals will avoid erotonormative assumptions and deeply analyze the intimacy of their relationship on a romantic or queerplatonic level.

As will be demonstrated in the essay which examines the asexual relationship presented in Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman's short story "Two Friends", the subject of a Boston marriage (or a bedfellow) does not overtly allude to lesbianism, existing outside of the Lesbian Death Bed even when constrained by both asexual and Lesbian Death Bed related stereotypes. The irony in this is that this short story is included within an anthology titled: *Two Friends: And other Nineteenth-Century Lesbian Stories by American Women Writers*, a name which asks its audience to read the story through the lens of homosexuality. However, when the story is read outside of the context of lesbian themed literature, the content of the story embodies the values and characteristics of a Boston marriage joined together by a queerplatonic relationship.

As Gendered Stereotypes Further an Asexual Narrative in Freeman's "Two Friends"

Published in 1887, Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman's short story "Two Friends" describes a late 19th-century American household that is run both financially and physically by two

women: Abby and Sarah. When Abby falls ill, all fear for the worst, expecting her untimely demise to come at any time. It's during this time that Sarah confesses to a close associate one of her deepests regrets: years ago, a man approached Abby intending to marry her, much to her mother's disapproval. Abby's mother adamantly declined on her daughter's behalf, but later rescinded this notion on her deathbed. This information was told to Sarah, later to be received by Abby. However, Sarah refused to convey this message and the two had been living together in domestic bliss ever since. Knowing now that she might never get the opportunity to confess this to Abby should she die, Sarah confesses all with the expectation that she will react harshly or with cruelty. Her contented response frames the asexual discourses of the short story's narrative.

The asexual relationship demonstrated within Freeman's short story "Two Friends" motivates the intimate connection between both Abby and Sarah through jealous intention, which keeps the characters bound locally within a Boston marriage. By implying they both operate within the house through the fulfillment of gendered tasks, the narrative implies that the two exceed the necessary heteronormative values needed by the two to cooperate successfully. In defining their relationship through the functionality of their home rather than romantic or sexual consorts, the short story exemplifies a queerplatonic relationship between the two characters while also defying the archetypes that attempt to desexualize women of older ages, as is noted in a chapter of Ela Przybylo's essay, *Asexual Erotics,* called "Erotics of Excess and the Aging Spinster". Ergo, in keeping the narrative stationed in the space that both Abby and Sarah define as their home—to the detriment of their relationship—the nuance of the aging spinster stereotype trumps the virginal expectations of aging wherein asexuality is the idealized representation of elderly women.

The queerplatonic environment that frames Freeman's short-story sets the foundation of a non-heteronormative household that is held together by queer elements. As both Abby and Sarah act as the primary caregivers and financial supporters of the house, by remaining unmarried and relying solely on one another for intimate support, friendship, and stability, their relationship aligns best with the queerplatonic label. As it was previously defined by Julie Decker in her book *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*, "queerplatonic relationships are those that consist of dedicated, long-term partnership between participants" (25). Many queerplatonic relationships are either misidentified as strictly homosexual or heterosexual due to the close nature of their partnership; conversely, they are also commonly mistaken for standard friendships due to the lack of overt romanticism expected from an allosexual partnership (Decker 25). Here, the stereotype can be exemplified in the metaliterary discourses that contain the story, as the title of the work, "Two Friends", implies both simultaneously. Taken literally, the story is about two friends and nothing more, as the lack of sexual or romantic content in the narrative does not suggest otherwise. However, when taking into account the historical discourses that often used the term 'friend' to hint at homosexual narratives, the term indicates a queer relationship between the two. Moreover, as the anthology that the short story is located in is called *Two Friends and Other Nineteenth-Century Lesbian Stories by American Women Writers*, the very enclosure that houses the narrative attempts to frame it in a sexualized queer light. As Ela Przybylo notes in her essay *Asexual Erotics*: "Intimate friendships, Boston marriages, woman-identified-woman, and lesbian trauma can all be fruitfully read as instances of attentiveness to asexual erotics within lesbian studies and indeed as a formative proximity between lesbianism and asexuality" (76). Here, Przybylo is redefining the word 'erotic' as a means of describing close and intimate moments rather than explicitly sexual ones (26). With this definition in mind,

the relationship between lesbianism and Boston marriages repurposes this focus on asexual erotics that illustrates the close relationship presented between these two LGBT+ works as they remove erotonormative assumptions from these analyses.

As there are no examples of either romantic nor sexual attraction in the narrative—simply a close, intimate lifestyle built upon the codependent dynamic of a pairing that becomes a self-sufficient, cohesive household in heteronormative society—the queerplatonic label best suits the Boston marriage lifestyle portrayed within Freeman's narrative. The queerplatonic relationship exemplified by Abby and Sarah within this narrative also aligns with the identifier of the Boston marriage in how their lives have been locally connected. To fulfill the requirements for a Boston marriage, as noted in Part 1, the couple in question must be both women, financially independent from all patriarchal influence (Rothblum and Brehony 5). The relationship is assumed to be nonsexual, but more intimate than a standard friendship. As the term queerplatonic describes the nature of their connection, the identifier 'Boston marriage' builds upon that queerplatonic identity by further clarifying the location which binds the relationship. According to the short story's narrative, both Abby and Sarah have lived together for thirty or more years (Freeman 136-139). By making this implication, the definitions used to explicate the pair place heavier amounts of emphasis on the atmosphere or space that houses the two, as it prescribes the basis of asexual analysis.

While the two are bound within a queerplatonic lifestyle, it is jealousy that motivates this transition towards a Boston marriage structure. Such is demonstrated through the plot of the short story, wherein it is revealed that the reason both Abby and Sarah have lived unmarried lives is that Sarah withheld consent for Abby to marry at all. Though this consent was initially provided by Abby's mother on her deathbed, Sarah's choice not to convey this information to

Abby at all prevented her from marrying one John Marshall, as she notes: "'I couldn't have her likin'anybody else, an' gittin' married. You don't know what I'd been through… I didn't have nobody in the world but Abby. I couldn't have it so—I couldn't—I couldn't'" (Freeman 137). This rejection of the conventional societal expectations of marriage subverts Abby and Sarah's queerplatonic relationship into an unconventional Boston marriage, prompted by jealousy but maintained through the codependent, functional nature of their household construction.

This pushes the narrative to maintain their financially codependent status through the opposition of this heteronormative custom. Paradoxically, the jealous intention provides the framework for the home that Abby and Sarah have built (which relied on lying by omission so to prevent the sanction of marriage from separating the two, thereby allowing the two to live together peacefully for approximately thirty years) further rejects the constitution of marriage through Abby's response to this reveal, strengthening the space which localized their queerplatonic relationship. Upon hearing the truth, or rather the information that Sarah refused to share with Abby about the approval she received to marry John Marshall, Abby laughs, and thus scorns the very idea of marriage altogether (Freeman 140). Abby's refute of the notion of ever leaving with the character of John Marshall not only contradicts heteronormative customs through her rejection of the marital process, but it exemplifies her refusal to conform to the feminine duties that household wives are asked to perform; her station in the house with Sarah creates a codependent and functional household that would not be present in a household with her and Marshall. Moreover, her preference for the intimate and friendly connection with Sarah draws her away from desiring a lavish household with a strange (though admittedly congenial) man, hence why she states at the conclusion of the short story: "'I wouldn't have had John Marshall if he'd come on his knees after me all the way from Mexico!" (Freeman 140).

The irony here is that the two maintain heteronormative customs even while embodying a same-sex codependent household. This is done through the gendering of the household requirements, such as chores and activities (Freeman 132). The masculine role of the house is assigned to Abby in lieu of her preferred household duties, wherein the text notes: "There had always been a settled and amicable division of labor between the two women. Abby did the rough work, the man's work of the establishment, and Sarah with her little, slim, nervous frame, the woman's work" (Freeman 132). Through the division of labor, the text defends Abby and Sarah's right to their household independent from social customs given their conformity to gendered roles within the same-sex narrative. In doing so, it also defends Sarah's omission of marital consent through the utilitarian success of their home, as the two have maintained this lifestyle for upwards of thirty years. Moreover, this division of labor exemplifies the two's codependence on one another through their conjunctive independence from social norms. As is noted within the text, Abby acts as the head of the household through the maintenance of their financial prosperities (Freeman 132). This, when coupled with their ages and genders, defies allosexual and economic archetypes that presuppose uselessness as a result of their opposition to the normative order surrounding them.

As both Abby and Sarah are over the age of fifty at the start of the short story's narrative (due to the fact that they have lived together for over thirty years), the spinsterhood they have formed together also pivots on the space which houses their queerplatonic relationship through the provision of the feminist values upheld by this resistance to heteronormative customs (such as marriage). The uselessness assumed by the stereotypes of the spinster alludes predominantly to the spinsterhood assumed by Abby and Sarah through their queerplatonic relationship. Ela Przybylo's essay *Asexual Erotics* comments on this discourse, noting that: "The body altered

with time tends to become a site socially despised—rendered ugly in appearance, useless in capitalist schemes of productivity and reproduction, and marked as not worthy and not capable of sexual interest and desire" (112). As the spinster—an older, unmarried woman with no children—does not pursue any of the heteronomative discourses pursued by erotonormative and allosexual expectations, the rejection of constructs such as marriage or parenthood focuses on the absence of productivity rather than what substitutes the space instead. Such can be seen in Ela Przybylo's essay, wherein she states: "The spinster is a feminist symbol of both strength and vulnerability, who, while rendered disposable through a hatred of aging, misogyny, an absence of couple privilege, lack of wealth and cultural resources, and desexualization, nonetheless figures rebelliously throughout history" (114). This victory can be viewed as paramount within Abby and Sarah's home, as it triumphs above normative customs through the rejection of erotonormative productivity through the provision of the functional, collaborative home that contributes to the happiness and comfort that both feel within this space.

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman's short story "Two Friends" localizes the queerplatonic relationship present between the characters of both Abby and Sarah through jealousy, thereby rejecting the heteronormative customs of marriage and parenthood in pursuit of a spinsterhood that founds a rapport within their Boston marriage, as is illustrated upon further by Ela Przybylo in her essay *Asexual Erotics*. In doing so, the narrative elaborates upon the importance of housing space which defines the intimate and functional processes which both adhere to and reject normative customs. By focusing on the serviceable nature of their relationship, the success and happiness of their home discredits many of the dysfunctional presumptions that accompany the desexualized archetypes surrounding older, nonheteronormative people, thereby providing a

positive space to reject erotonormative customs in a powerful, constructive fashion for the asexual analysis.

Chapter 3: The Demi Rhetoric

The ways that an asexual relationship can be assessed increases tenfold once romanticism is reintroduced into the narrative. As will be present in each essay concerning an analysis of asexual relationships in 19th to 20th-century classics, the effects of romantic orientation in literature—as will be presented through relationships between characters—will help illustrate asexual tendencies. Such behavior will diverge from the erotonormative understanding of modern relationships, resisting sensuality whilst also establishing a strong preference in romantic intention.

The way that romance connects and reacts to asexual terminology becomes more interactive when the romantic relationship formed with an individual is contingent on emotional connection and readiness. With regards towards the term 'demisexuality', this relationship between emotional and romantic interest can even create connections between an asexual person and sexual attraction. As Julie Decker notes in her book *The Invisible Orientation*, demisexuality is formally defined as a form of secondary attraction (38). In other words, this form of attraction does not manifest alone due to the physical attributes or qualities of a person and requires a deep emotional connection for sexual attraction to develop (Decker 38). However, this is not to assume anything about the relationship between a demisexual person and the sex they have. The only thing known in absolute certainty is that the emotional connection formed between a demisexual person and their partner has the potential to spark sexual attraction within a

demiromantic person (Decker 39). Julie Decker also keenly addresses this distinction, as she states:

> **A demisexual labeling doesn't describe whether a person has sex, nor does it suggest a person embraces any particular ideology about sex**… Whether these folks have sex is a choice, but whether they experience sexual attraction is not a choice. Their orientation is not about sex moralism. (Decker 39)

In this quote, Decker not only confronts many assumptions about how sex—once it has been inserted as a possibility within a social narrative—becomes an erotonormative standard that hypsersexual discourses expect to be met, but also that the act of sex is a choice while the ability to feel sexual attraction is not (Decker 39). This is what solidifies demisexuality's place on the asexual spectrum, as a person's relationship to sexual attraction is not a choice, but is available under very specific circumstances, much like graysexuality (Decker 39). This kind of connection is also seen in demiromanticism, which is used to describe a person who only experiences romantic attraction after creating a deep emotional connection or bond with another person. Like graysexuality, demiromanticism is contextualized and dependent on how a social connection is formed with others, and can be expanded upon to include a preferred gender.

By suggesting that asexuality, or sexuality as a whole, is something one uses to expand their understanding of their romantic and sexual preferences—as well as their sense of self, the advancement of the novel's narrative and plot, as directed by her intention to seek out happiness in any form it may come to her—nonsexual behavior can be used to exemplify the fluidity of the romantic and sexual identity.

Sex and Asexuality

This discussion of sex—given its relationship to romanticism within demisexuality—as an existing factor in the content of asexual literature between 19th to 20th-centuries not only complicates how asexual relationships will be isolated, but also brings into question how the nature of consensual sex is to be interpreted in literature of this caliber. Within the asexual spectrum, there are a series of terms used to describe an asexual person's relationship to sex, if they have one at all. These terms are as follow: sexual repulsion, indifference, and sex-positivity (Przybylo 6). The first term, sexual repulsion, is what is most commonly associated with a stereotyped understanding of asexuality, as it reflects a person or character's genuine disgust or discomfort with any form of sexual conduct (Decker 30). The lack of sexual interest or desire in an asexual individual is often assumed to be a result of their aversion to sex, and in the case of sexually repulsed individuals, this is correct. It is much more common for an asexual individual to be averse to sex rather than indifferent or positive (Decker 31). However, the very fact that there is variety to how sex is interpreted by asexual people challenges this assumption and allows for more variety in how it will present itself in literature. The second term, indifference, implies just that: an asexual person or character carries an indifferent attitude towards sex, neither caring for it nor disagreeing with it. (Przybylo 6). Asexual individuals indifferent to sex may compromise with their partners or their significant others—assuming they are not also asexual—and agree to a certain degree of sexual regimen in their relationships. In literature, this attitude can be a distinct identifier of asexuality, as those who carry an indifferent attitude towards sex typically have no motivation to outright pursue sexual relationships. The third term, sex-positivity, is used to describe asexual individuals who have a positive opinion of sex (Decker 30). This is to say that an asexual individual may enjoy the act of sex even without any desire to have it, which in no way invalidates their nonsexual identity, given that "orientation is not the

same thing as behavior" (30). Sexual behavior is not an indicator that someone is any more or less asexual, because a person or character's attitude towards sex is just as pertinent in how their asexuality will appear to other people or in literature.

This is why asexuality does not imply that those determined to be of an asexual nature within the reading will be absent of either the act of sex or romantic interest. Asexual individuals are under the constant supervision of social norms once any sort of relationship has formed between the individual and another person, and many assume that the presence of sex in an asexual relationship will invalidate or compromise the asexuality of an individual. However, as Julie Decker stated once before, consensual sex presents itself as a choice to any individual willing to partake in it; to the asexual individual, sex is also choice, but their ability to feel sexual attraction never is (39). The very premise of asexuality, therefore, challenges the idea of friendships with homoerotic implications by displaying relationships that are overtly romantic but do not demand sexual activity to validate their relationship. Moreover, should the couple be engaged in an agreement that does solicit the act of sex, such action does not dismerit a person or character's identity as asexual.

The intersectional nature of demisexuality and sex within the asexual spectrum is discussed in greater depth in the concluding section of this project, wherein Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening,* is used to illustrate the process of asexual growth as it correlates with the intention of rebuking heteronormative and erotonormative tradition. As a consequence, the release from these social constraints grants the novel's protagonist the freedom to explore her own identity outside of social expectations, thusly growing into her own asexual identity.

A Growing Narrative of Demisexuality within Chopin's *The Awakening*

Published in 1899, Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, places focus on the character of an unhappy Edna Pontellier. Dissatisfied with her life as a wife, a mother, and the head of a semi-wealthy household, Edna pursues an affair with several men as a means of pursuing her personal definition of happiness. In doing so, Edna begins to blossom into an independent woman of society. However, the scandal which unfolds from her previous affairs proves detrimental to her mental wellbeing, as the novel concludes with Edna's suicide.

Chopin's novel imparts the grey aspect of the asexual spectrum through the idea of framing gradual relationships that introduce romantic and sexual attraction as key components of the novel's narrative. This is exercised through the physical and social independence sought out by the character of Edna Pontellier, as the process by which she grows into her demisexual identity is issued by her shift to social and financial independence, made possible through an exercise of residential space. As discussed by Virginia Woolf in her essay "A Room of One's Own", this relationship between social independence and expression is deeply tied to women's financial relationship given 19th-century social customs, hence the need for physical distance from heteronormative society. It's this space that allows for her to grow in her private enclosure, branching away from the social norms that dictate where she stays and with which family she belongs. In doing so, Edna creates a space that dictates her commitment to self-happiness and growth, which is contingent on the lack of romantic desire that spurns her deviance from societal expectations.

This growth and acceptance of her own romantic and sexual orientations permit Edna a great deal of happiness and freedom otherwise misunderstood by her husband and companions, as they view this change as one which confines her to solitary measures. Her husband, family members, and friends all fail to see how this change in behavior and social presentation expands

upon her character and happiness, viewing these changes as an act of confinement rather than a force of liberation. This is what Ela Przybylo refers to in her work Asexual Erotics as "growing into" asexuality, which is an idea that counters asexual stereotypes of how one might eventually "grow out of" their asexual traits or preferences (31).

The term demisexual is used to describe the process through which Edna recognizes her capacity for romantic and sexual attraction through what is lacking in her current marriage. As demisexuality was previously defined as a form of secondary attraction, wherein sexual attraction is developed as a result of a strong emotional connection between two or more individuals, the development of Edna's capacity for romantic and sexual attraction—which occur at separate segments of the novel's narrative—thereby dominating the plot of the novel of these deficits in her marriage to the character of Léonce Pontellier (Decker 28). This can be especially exemplified through the first romantic subplot illustrated between Edna and a character by the name of Robert Lebrun. While the affair between Robert and Edna is regarded with a certain level of promiscuity within the text, Edna reinforces the idea that this romantic affair is of absolute necessity following several chapters wherein the unhappiness she feels within her marriage is illustrated, as she notes:

> As the devoted wife of a man who worshipped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams…
>
> She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution. (Chopin 18)

Here, it can be noted that Edna revokes any idea or mention of romantic attraction to Léonce and how this rejection has affected her happiness as it comes at the expense of future romances and dreams (Chopin 18). In addition to this, prior to this statement, Edna clarifies that while she has demonstrated romantic interest in other men in the past, she was never given the freedom or opportunity to pursue them, therefore presenting a contrasting argument that while she has the capacity for romantic attraction, she does not feel it towards her husband whatsoever (Chopin 17-18). Given the state of unhappiness at which she finds herself in this marriage, the text above references how this romantic interaction with Robert is inevitable.

Though the text is keen to emphasize the intensity of their attraction to one another, the nature of this attraction is not strictly specified. However, the romantic nature of their relationship is distinguished through the pontification of Edna's development of sexual attraction towards another character, Alcée Arobin, as the novel reads (following their first kiss): "It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire" (Chopin 83). This statement inferences how the character of Robert Lebrun, when coupled with Alcée Arobin, acts as a foil to Léonce Pontellier which illustrates the demisexual narrative presented through Edna's self-alienation from heteronormative Creole society. While Léonce's interest in Edna rotates around her ability to produce, maintain, and adhere to social customs (as well as his personal interests and expectations), Robert's initial pursuit of Edna is motivated by similar self-serving interests that are beneficial to her happiness and pleasure alone (Chopin 5). Though both are selfish characters, they act as a foil to one another as a result of how Edna is viewed as a person concerning her own happiness.

The demisexual nature of Edna's character, localized in each romantic and sexual pursuit, dictates the plot of the novel's narrative via her own social and physical separation from social

standards. The social norms that constrain Edna Pontellier are tied within the idealized image of the American family. Although she begins as both a wife and mother to two children, as well as the head of her household, her relationship to this state of residence is one of contractual obligation, rooted in the expectations of marriage. This first rejection of social norms begins with Edna's first romantic interest. Her relationship with the character of Robert Lebrun is distinctly clarified as a romantic pursuit, which takes place while Edna still resides with her family. Ela Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics*—specifically, the chapter titled "Growing into Asexuality"—focuses on how asexuality develops within children as a means of confronting the desexualized efforts made around children in heteronormative society (Przybylo 93). These efforts made to sanitize one's childhood of sexuality or sexual awareness tend to reinforce asexual narratives through the idealization of asexual standards (Przybylo 103). As stereotypical images associated with asexuality are virginal, pure, or innocent, the spectrum of asexual exposure to sex outright contradicts the problems found in Chopin's *The Awakening,* as Przybylo notes: "Queer theory is invested in encouraging children to know and claim their queerness through being exposed to sexual knowledge and cultures" (96).

Given that asexuality is included under the spectrum of queer theory, Edna's pursuit of a space to develop or understand her own sexual and romantic interests defies the stereotyped views of innocence in her demisexual advancements, as many consider her affairs to be scandalous (Chopin 81). Though Edna Pontellier does not technically qualify as a child at her age, her stature in Creole society treats her with childish regards, hence her codependent status on her husband for money, housing, and general welfare (Chopin 13). Heteronormative society fosters this mentality within Edna as well, as she comes to realize that the smallness of the life she has lived within herself is perpetuated by societal expectations that warrant others to regard

her decisions and normative rebuttals as childlike as opposed to mature (Chopin 13). Therefore, the severity of her severance from social customs and obligations is not taken as seriously as one typically would with regards to the act of adultery.

While Edna Pontellier may be an adult, her character is stationed in heteronormative Creole society with the same respects and obedient expectations as a child would; the implication that she should maintain a sanitized sexual and romantic image for the sake of social heteronormative customs is representative of her childlike stature, despite her adult-like responsibilities. In fact, many of her house-bound duties are given to Edna as a sort of contractual obligation to her marriage, as her husband Mr. Pontellier often refers to these social obligations as observing "*les convenances*", or the conventions of their society (Chopin 81). However, the advancements of the plot negate this notion of asexual stereotypes, as Edna pursues a residence separate from her family and social expectation; this act of spacially asserting her financial and localized independence, she has created a space to grow into her new sexual and romantic identity.

The lack of romantic reciprocation from her husband, Léonce Pontellier, is a driving factor in what makes Edna's separation from her family necessary; her severance mandates an evaluation of her own romantic and sexual needs as they manifest in this space. By this, the novel implies that without this space, these intimate relationships she forms with both Robert and Alcée would not have any reservation to be nurtured. Though Edna's affair with Robert first begins before she has pursued a private enterprise (financially and locally), this relationship still required the necessary space to be fostered. Hence, why each rendezvous was confined to the space of the beach, a space which inspired Edna to pursue independent experiences after she learned to swim (Chopin 13).

Part of what illustrates the confining elements of Edna's social normative confinements are the obligations tied to her marriage, namely her children. The presence of children in this narrative also acts as a vice through which many presume the heterosexual nature of Edna Pontellier's sexuality. In separating from Léonce, she creates a division between her obligations to her family as a whole as well. However, her rejection of the social norms which bind her to her role as both mother and wife creates the understanding that this participation in heteronormative culture was one of obligation rather than inherent desire. Her children were not then the product of sexual attraction, nor the actual desire to have a family, but were rather part of the social expectation of a Creole family in heteronormative society (Chopin 5). Moreover, Edna notes to herself within the text that:

> She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them… Feeling secure regarding their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (Chopin 18)

With regards to the conclusory line of this example, Edna demonstrates how her marriage to Léonce came with the obligation of parenthood (motherhood for her, specifically), which likewise became a factor of social expectation that she did not personally align with (Chopin 18). By negotiating a space wherein she chooses the level of commitment to these social expectations, Edna creates a space to potentially grow into these responsibilities as opposed to being assigned them blindly due to their marriage. However, to do so Edna must also separate herself from the financial codependency reinforced by marital standards of the 19th-century.

The stateliness or attractiveness of Edna's husband, Léonce, is reduced to monetary value, as most of his concerns for her station do not concern her wellbeing but rather the state of his "financial integrity" (Chopin 93). His appeal is then reduced to the simple fact that, while others are all free to "declare Mr. Pontellier (is) the best husband in the world", Edna is "forced to admit that she knew of none better"; his attractiveness does not appeal to romantic or sexual standards, but rather to her state of ignorance to the unhappiness she feels (initially) in her own marriage (Chopin 7). In addition to this, Léonce reciprocates this sentiment with Edna, as he refers to her as "the sole object of his existence" (Chopin 5). Therefore, Edna's pursuit of financial stability apart from Léonce (as she begins to rent a cottage for herself to reside in apart from their physical property) stands to separate the two from any obligation to one another financially (Chopin 79).

The claustrophobia felt by Edna that is perpetuated by heteronormative society is not then limited to the outlines of social conduct but to the financial constraints that legally bind her to her husband monetarily. Elaborated upon more by Virginia Woolf in her essay "A Room of One's Own", the need for physical separation is necessary for the development of one's creative outlets, or else all other images produced will be secondary to the foremost opinion and consternation of male influence (Woolf). However, in order for a woman to attain space separate from male influence (namely, marriage), she must also retain the financial prosperity to afford such freedoms (Woolf). The text offers an example of how the process through which money is distributed greatly influences what work or mindset a woman is more likely to uphold, as it states: "Every penny I earn, they may have said, will be taken from me and disposed of according to my husband's wisdom—perhaps to found a scholarship or to endow a fellowship in Balliol or Kings, so that to earn money, even if I could earn money, is not a matter that interests

me very greatly. I had better leave it to my husband" (Woolf). This mentality reinforces financial codependence while compromising independent developmental spaces. Though Woolf's essay concerns itself with the space necessary to promote uncensored literary production among women, the crux of her argument also pivots on creating a space which nurtures the growth of one's personal identity apart from heteronormativity, as this stands to influence their written process (Woolf). In response to social conformity, Edna Pontellier aligns with this sentiment in Woolf's essay, as is exemplified through her physical and financial separation from her husband. This space fosters the growth of her newfound sexual identity and interests, which oppose societal standards through the pursuit of romantic interests that later develop into sexual interests.

Edna's demisexual narrative within Chopin's *The Awakening* acts as the forefront of the literary plot as she emerges into this newfound state of social and normative independence. This need for space in order to grow into and develop her own demisexual identity is paramount to the plot of the novel, which revolves around her dismissal of heteronormative social customs within Creole society and other characters' attempts to reinstate Edna within those heteronormative customs. The process through which this space reinforces how she is able to "grow into" her own demisexual orientation is representative of how the stereotyped images of asexuality, as discussed by Ela Przybylo in her essay *Asexual Erotics*, are countered by the reality of queer theory. Aligning with Virginia Woolf's argument for financial independence as a means of founding creative expression, Edna utilizes this space as a means of defying heteronormtative customs, thereby privileging her own happiness above the erotonormative, codependent constraints of Creole society.

Conclusion: Asexual Erasure Undone

The dissolution of erotonormative expectations while maintaining focus on the local of a narrative from within Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman's short story"Two Friends", Alan Dale's *A Marriage Below Zero*, and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has allowed the nonsexual relationships within these 19th and 20th-century texts to expose themselves, thusly undoing the historical and systemic erasure of nonsexual behavior from within them. By reestablishing the term's definition and the ramifications of the asexual spectrum, modern definitions of nonsexual behavior can be sourced out from a plethora of literary texts outside of these few works, expanding the universal understanding and advocacy of the asexual spectrum.

This project is merely a start in the process of unraveling all asexual representations from literature published before the modern understanding of the term. However, it starts with the grounds for a complete and total understanding of the asexual spectrum. By reframing a number of erotonormative stereotypes, so as to dismantle any allosexual presuppositions within the following literary analysis, all focus on allosexual and nonsexual relationships is placed on the space housing these relationships (including those that are solely between the character and themselves). This is done with the purpose of closely conveying the tension which often illustrates asexual behavior.

It starts this way because this is merely a beginning. In time, more literary uncoverings of asexual relationships within large bodies of literature will surface. Undoubtedly, there will be a vast expanse of literature available for any and all who resonate—or who suspect that they will resonate—with asexuality. It will be used for literary research as a means of expanding perspectivism, representation, and visibility. And it ends with the undoing of asexual erasure

completely.

But for now, it begins here.

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