

Enriching the Story: Asexuality and Aromanticism in Literature

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the role of asexual and aromantic coding within Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* and Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*. Both books utilize relationships and sexuality in order to portray arguments within the book. Brontë portrays Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship as transcending physicality, both as a way to portray them as soulmates but also to foreshadow events. Woolf utilizes Lily's disinterest in sex and marriage as a way to contrast her to other women in the novel. Both characterizations can be read as asexual, or in Lily's case also aromantic. This queer reading allows insight into the characters but it also creates a characterization rarely seen in popular media or literature. It challenges social assumptions about sexuality and romance as well as heteronormative readings of literature. It gives the asexual and aromantic community a literary presence but also shows that the lack of representation can be damaging to the understanding and acceptance of asexual and aromantic individuals.

Keywords: asexuality, aromanticism, queer reading, asexual representation, aromantic representation, literature

Much of literature is a dialogue between the reader's understanding and the author's portrayal of characters and events. This leads to various interpretations of text and many new ideas can be read into literature by virtue of a new perspective. One way to understand literature is through a queer reading. Queer theory informs the reader that it is okay and even encouraged to break away from heteronormative assumptions of sexuality and gender, "locating non-heteronormative practices and subjects as

crucial sites of resistance” (Green, 2007, p. 28). Beyond this, it also allows readers of all ages to find themselves fully within a text or a character. As children and adolescents read, they search for themselves. This is especially true with queer children and the slow emergence of canonical queer characters in media and books can only help individuals discover themselves and their identities. Despite this, the overwhelming lack of asexual and aromantic characters in popular media and literature leaves much to be desired. Most individuals cannot define asexuality or aromanticism, let alone point to an example in pop culture. For clarity’s sake, asexuality encompasses the idea of an individual who feels little to no sexual attraction, it can mean anything: from being sex repulsed, to seeing sex as something not worth pursuing, or even someone who only rarely has sexual attraction for another (Decker, 2015). Aromanticism follows this same pattern for romantic attraction. The lack of overt and diverse characters who are aromantic or asexual within popular media creates a void of information. It limits what the average individual knows about asexuality and aromanticism. Media informs how people perceive the world and more importantly it informs how people perceive various forms of sexuality. By not including asexuality and aromanticism more openly in pop culture dialogues about individuals and humanity, asexuality and aromanticism become erased from what it means to be human.

Because of this, queer readings of literature can help validate and expand upon how we as individuals see the world and how asexuality and aromanticism can be valid interpretations. This overturns the assumed heterosexuality of characters and instead offers one that is asexual and aromantic. Asexuality and aromanticism in literature need to be a part of academic discourse as they “challenge many existing assumptions about gender and sexuality” (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010, p. 655). Because of this, my taking of two literary classics and applying an asexual and aromantic lens to them not only legitimizes the validity of a queer reading but it also makes readers reconsider

characterizations and deepens the literary dialogue. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (2003/1847) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1981/1927), while different in many ways, share how certain characters can be read. Brontë's portrayal of Heathcliff and Catherine's relationship can be read as asexual in nature while Woolf's Lily Briscoe can be read in an asexual and aromantic light. Reading both under the lens of asexuality creates a new way of understanding each character. Although both novels vary in tone, narration, style, and genre, they both utilize coding that can be read as asexual. The unique relationship held between Catherine and Heathcliff is one that transcends physicality, embodying the Romantic ideal of their passions that continues beyond death. Lily Briscoe's coding as asexual and aromantic helps highlight the differences between her and other women in the book. Reading both books with an understanding of asexuality helps foster greater understanding of the underlying emotions and motivations held by every character.

Heathcliff and Catherine's relationship in *Wuthering Heights* goes beyond the physical aspect. Although both are raised as adopted siblings, Catherine describes Heathcliff as her "soul" and Heathcliff returns the sentiment (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.125; p.130). Frequently throughout the novel, the relationship portrayed is one of soulmates, or one soul trapped in two bodies. Neither can truly live without the other. Catherine says to her housekeeper Nelly that she loves Heathcliff, "not because he's handsome, Nelly, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.63). Heathcliff expresses his need for Catherine by begging her to "haunt" him or "take any form" (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.130). Both Heathcliff and Catherine are linked, as Catherine says, "If all else perished, and *he* remained, I should still continue to be" (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.64). Similarly, Heathcliff laments to Catherine on her deathbed, "Oh, Cathy! Oh, my life!" (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.123). This theme, of transcending the physical aspects of their dependency, is

asexual in nature. Not once do they lust after each other; their connection is more intrinsic and toxic than that. By creating a sexless relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, Brontë foreshadows their continued existence together beyond life and body. At the end, after Heathcliff dies, they are seen together on the moors, wandering as spirits. Neither of their heavens is the Christian Heaven, but each other out on the moors. Heathcliff, shortly before he dies, says “I tell you, I have nearly attained *my* heaven,” his heaven being Catherine (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.255). They are not truly themselves unless they are with each other. They find peace through haunting the moors together. Catherine tells Heathcliff she “won’t rest until” he is with her (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.99). The passions between Catherine and Heathcliff are not those of the body but those of the spirit. Continually, they reference their feelings for each other involving life, souls, and being. Catherine states that she is Heathcliff, “not as a pleasure, anymore that I am always a pleasure to myself – but, as my own being” (Brontë/1847, 2003, p.63). Their relationship is one that revolves around them being the same intrinsically and therefore beyond the realm of the physical.

This idea of beyond physicality is exemplified when compared to Heathcliff’s relationship with his wife Isabella Linton and Catherine’s relationship with her husband Edgar Linton. Both Heathcliff and Catherine use sexuality and physicality to manipulate their respective spouses. Catherine rewards Edgar for allowing her to go to Wuthering Heights with a “summer of sweetness and affection” making the house a “paradise” where Edgar profited much (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.79). For Catherine, her love for Edgar Linton is shallow compared to her deep passion for Heathcliff. As similar as she is to Heathcliff, she says that Linton’s soul is as “different as a moonbeam from lightning or frost from fire” (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.63). She considers soul compatibility above physical attraction and uses that physical attraction to manipulate her husband, rewarding him and making him jealous in turn, saying, “I gave a few sentences of

commendation to Heathcliff, and [Edgar Linton], either for a headache or a pang of envy, began to cry” (Brontë/1847, 2003, p.77). Even though Heathcliff is physically more attractive than Edgar, Catherine never uses it as a justification of her love for him, nor does she lend herself to commit adultery, having Heathcliff is enough.

Similarly, Heathcliff uses his attractiveness to lure in Isabella and manipulate her. This is mainly as a way to take revenge against her brother, Edgar, for marrying Catherine. Heathcliff uses physical affection to make Isabella fall deeper in love with him, “supposing himself unseen, the scoundrel had the impudence to embrace [Isabella]” (Brontë/1847, 2003, p.87). He justifies himself by saying that Catherine does the same thing with Edgar so “only allow me to amuse myself a little in the same style” (Brontë, 2003/1847, p.88). It is amusing to them to manipulate people through sexual or physical acts. The way sexuality is portrayed and viewed by both Catherine and Heathcliff is shallow or not as worthy as their passions for each other. For Heathcliff and Catherine, sexuality comes second to their soulmate based love. They are indifferent to sex when it comes to their true desires, creating a coded asexuality within *Wuthering Heights*. This idea, that they love beyond their physical forms at once foreshadows their fate of haunting the moors and also creates an interesting example of a romantic asexual relationship full of sexless passion.

Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* uses a different form of coding to depict Lily Briscoe, a friend of the Ramsays who stays with them over the summer, as aromantic and asexual. Within the novel, Woolf shows a variety of women, from the older generation of housewives to the “New Woman” who was more liberated. Lily is a painter who “would always go on painting, because it interested her” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.72). She does not see herself as one to marry as “she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.50). For Lily, marriage is a “degradation” and actively dreads it in the first part of the novel, especially with Mrs. Ramsay’s emphasis on

matchmaking with her guests (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.102). Lily still sees the beauty in love but the kind of love that unifies humanity. Lily is forever looking for “unity” with others, an “intimacy” that could not “be written in any language known to men” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.51). She prefers intimacy without the entanglement of romance or marriage, and all that implies: “indeed, his friendship had been one of the pleasures of her life. She loved William Bankes” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.176). Throughout the book, Lily struggles with the paradox of love being the “stupidest, the most barbaric of human passions” and it also being “beautiful” and “exciting” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.102). By the end of the novel, Lily comes to the resolution that separates romantic love from all other kinds of love.

Every example Lily observes of love is in the form of romance: Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay or Paul and Minta. She sees how destructive it can be, as Mr. Ramsay “took” so much from Mrs. Ramsay that she died from giving (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.149). Lily also has a pessimistic view of relations between men and women, viewing them as “extremely insincere” due to the gendered roles they are forced into (Woolf/1927, 1981, p.92). Through Lily, Woolf portrays a new emerging thought that rejects gender and sexuality roles as well as female submissiveness. The fact that Woolf chose to portray Lily as completely uninterested in romance and marriage creates an ample argument for Lily’s aromantic asexuality. Through this portrayal of Lily, the validity and positivity of asexual aromanticism can be seen. Woolf did not turn Lily’s “old-maid” status into something to pity or something that is above all other relationships in the book, but she portrays it as a fact of life. Lily did not marry because she was not interested in any aspect of it.

From an asexual and aromantic perspective, Lily’s disinterest in sexual feeling or romance creates an interesting dichotomy to the rest of the women in the novel. Mrs. Ramsay is in many ways the antithesis of Lily. Mrs. Ramsay views marriage and parenthood as the epitome of a woman’s life, wanting both her children and any young

woman she meets to find happiness through marriage. Throughout the book, Mrs. Ramsay can be seen playing matchmaker thinking that William Bankes and Lily “must marry” because they are walking together (Woolf, 1981/1927, p. 71). Mrs. Ramsay sees life fulfillment with marriage, something that Lily cannot understand, saying, “what was [Mrs. Ramsay’s] mania for marriage?” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.175). Not only does this create a beautiful contrast between generations, it also helps highlight exactly how much marriage disinterests and even scares Lily. For Lily, marriage is a trap and when she realizes that she “need never marry anybody,” Lily feels “an enormous exultation” (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.176). Lily prefers friendship and her art over any possible romance as shown in her lasting friendship with William Bankes. This exalting of friendship over romance is a common theme of Lily’s and gives credence to her aromantic view of the world. When she learns that Paul and Minta “were ‘in love’ no longer” and that “he had taken up with another woman,” she felt vindicated (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.174). Paul and Minta worked out how to stay friends by no longer being in love, and “they’re happy like that; [Lily is] happy like this,” by staying single (Woolf, 1981/1927, p.175).

Through these three women and their relationships of various forms, Woolf shows the multiple ways a woman can become fulfilled in life. Mrs. Ramsay viewed marriage as fulfillment for her, and all women. Minta thought marriage was the answer but she found friendship was the better course with her husband Paul. Lily, through observing these two marriages, is able to come to terms with and accept her disinterest in that path in life. She discovers the fulfillment that comes with work and with friendship. The portrayal of Lily as asexual and aromantic helps highlight the different forms of love and how no form is better than the other. In the same vein, Lily’s characterization defines what it means to be a woman with the answer being that there is no right way, there is only who they are. By reading Lily as aromantic and asexual, a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the

various women can be found. Lily is not a curiosity, but a person in her portrayal. Not only does Lily embody the New Woman's ideal of work before marriage but she also perfectly captures an asexual and aromantic indifference to sex and romance while elevating the status of friendship, both between men and women and between women.

The reading of Lily Briscoe and the relationship of Catherine and Heathcliff through the lens of sexual indifference adds dimensions to the respective books. The use of asexual or aromantic ideas helps create a more nuanced portrayal of the emotions and thoughts of the various characters within the book. By reading Cathy and Heathcliff as asexual, not only does their relationship reflect more fully the reality they ultimately create, but it also shows how passion can be removed from physicality. Lily Briscoe's disinterest in romance and marriage puts her at odds with the ideals of Mrs. Ramsay and creates an interesting dichotomy among the various women within *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf uses Lily as a way to look at the New Woman and the various forms of love as being equal to romance and old fashioned views. Reading Lily as an aromantic asexual adds a further facet to the character as well as the novel. Lily is content with her life as it is and her lifestyle is seen as just as valid as the other characters who do enter into a sexual or romantic relationship. Therefore, Lily isn't just a representation of the New Woman, she is also a validation that to be asexual and aromantic is a valid identity. Though *Wuthering Heights* and *To the Lighthouse* are different genres and reading experiences, both authors utilize ideas that can be interpreted as asexual or aromantic in order to further the themes and ideas of their books and deepen the dialogue between reader and writer. It overturns heteronormative and flat assumptions about the various relationships depicted in the book.

These works of literature connect across genres and time periods through the use of a queer reading of asexuality and aromanticism, but these themes continue to pop up in modern society. The fact that asexuality and aromanticism

must be inferred from most texts and media is disheartening. Asexual and aromantic lived experiences, themes, and subtexts are not new concepts. They are valid themes within literature and their traits have been acknowledged and seen throughout history, though they have only recently been given a name. Today, by acknowledging them, we begin to understand the diverse sexualities in our own culture and time. Sexual orientation is not simply a “fad” one grows out of, it is a real, human experience. By understanding and reading into the lives of characters from literature as well as within other media, the audience can begin to empathize with those around them. For asexuals and aromantics, it gives validation of their own identity as well as representation within literature and media that expands beyond the community and into popular thought. For non-asexuals and non-aromantics, proper representation shows that individuals who have little to no sexual and or romantic attraction do exist, overturning the general assumptions that romance and sexual desire go hand in hand, and it connects them to diverse people, allowing them to understand and not invalidate the sexualities of others through simple ignorance. Queer readings using an asexual and aromantic light is a good first step into acknowledging the complex nature of romance and sexuality in society today. It challenges the notion of what it means to be queer as well as creating conversation about asexuality and aromanticism. More investigations into and representations of these identities would go a long way to validating them in mainstream society while simultaneously informing individuals who do not feel sexual or romantic attraction that they are not alone. Representation, both on an academic as well as a popular level, normalizes identities, ideas, and people. To do so with asexuality and aromanticism would foster a better understanding not only of the asexual and aromantic communities, but also a better understanding of what it means to be human. Since literature is an exploration of the human condition, to bring conversation about asexuality and

aromanticism can only enrich our understanding of the stories presented.

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