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THE VICISSITUDES OF LACK: SITUATING ASEXUALITY WITHIN
PSYCHOANALYSIS

A Thesis Presented

by

Nicholas Adler

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

Asexuality—though increasingly represented in film and television, popular discourse, activism, and the LGBTQ+ community—remains practically unrecognized by established scholars within queer theory. This thesis project traces the issue to the difficulty of having productive discussions about asexuality within the psychoanalytic framework used so frequently by queer theorists. It goes on to posit that, within this context, asexuality can only be used productively if understood in terms of drive, rather than desire—which is the more frequent site for discussions of sexual orientation. Using drive allows asexuality to be thought of in terms other than lack or deficiency, ultimately laying the groundwork for examinations of the ways in which difference is subsumed by lack. In other words, this project has the potential to do far more than challenge queer theory’s practice of asexual erasure. The process of refiguring what is commonly understood as lack or deficiency in terms of difference both extends one of queer theory’s major projects and endows asexuality studies with the potential to enter a wide range of discussions, like those centering around neoliberal capitalism or disability studies.

This project examines the elision of asexuality—generally understood as a lack of sexual attraction to others—over the past couple of decades by some of queer theory’s key figures, responds to the contemporary queer theorists that do acknowledge (and even focus on) asexuality, investigating their unwillingness or inability to work productively with psychoanalysis, and considers the link that already exists between asexuality and psychoanalysis, breaking down the ways in which variations in the functioning of drive (a force in Lacanian psychoanalysis distinct from—but inextricably linked to—desire) are coded as asexuality. It ultimately discusses the ways in which our current understanding of asexuality is linked to variations (either lack or excess) in the “proper” sexual functioning of drive rather than lack or deficiency, offering asexuality studies as a way to challenge dominant ideologies surrounding deficiency, success, and excess—both inside and outside of discussions around sexuality.

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CHAPTER 1: WHAT'S MISSING?

1.1 Brief History

Asexuality, as a namable sexual orientation, is generally not traced back further than 1997. The word itself has been used in the context of biology to refer to organisms “having no sex or sexual system” since 1829 and in general contexts to refer to the state of “wanting sexuality, being of or referring to neither sex” since 1896. Having that definition, it was usable in technical discussions such as those surrounding the practice of celibacy and in pathologizations of low sexual desire—initially termed “frigidity” and later “hypoactive sexual desire disorder” (Przybylo 11). In 1869, in the same pamphlet where he coined the terms “heterosexual” and “homosexual,” Austrian journalist Karl-Maria Kertbeny coined the term “monosexual” in reference to people who only masturbate (Feray et al. 87). In 1948, the Kinsey Scale included the category “X” for those who reported no socio-sexual contacts or reactions (“The Kinsey Scale”). And in 1977, Myra Johnson actually used the word “asexual” to describe a complete lack of sexual desire in a paper entitled “Asexual and Autoerotic Women: Two Invisible Groups” (Johnson 15) It wasn’t until 1997, though, that the term was used notably outside of academic contexts. That year, in StarNet Dispatches, Zoe O’Reilly posted “My life as an amoeba”, a brief, playful, and honest “asexual” manifesto that purposefully blurred the line between biological asexuality and sexual orientation. Her writing sparked numerous responses, some simply trying to unpack her use of the word “asexual” and some expressing identification and taking the first steps toward forming online communities.

In the two decades since O’Reilly introduced it into public discourse, the term has experienced an explosive increase in visibility and identification. Zine publications, pride

parades, and an annual “Asexual Awareness Week” now serve to bring the community together. AVEN—the online community and education space for asexually identified people—includes over 250,000 members (Przybylo 4). In their introduction to *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, Karli Cerankowski and Megan Milks draw attention to the growing body of scholarship on asexuality. They acknowledge that the scholarly field was initially largely limited to discussions of social psychology and physiology but add that “the discourse has since expanded into the realms of literary studies, disability studies, cultural studies, legal studies, and more” (Cerankowski, Milks 2). Mainstream media representations of asexuality have also become far more prevalent. In the past five years, Todd Chavez of *Bojack Horseman*, Raphael Santiago of *Shadowhunters*, and Jughead Jones in the 2015 reboot of his solo comic have all explicitly identified as asexual. Celebrities, such as Tim Gunn and Janeane Garofalo, have also come out as asexual in recent years, making visibility and advocacy efforts more compelling for their fans.

1.2 Tricky Terminology

The commonly accepted definition of asexuality, and the one employed by AVEN, is the nonexperience of sexual attraction. Of course, sexual attraction is by no means a clear-cut term. It could be discussed in terms of physiology, psychology, or ideology, and within none of those frameworks does a distinct, universally accepted threshold exist between experience and nonexperience. As a result, numerous categories of identification exist within the umbrella of asexuality. An asexual person could identify as aromantic (not experiencing romantic or sexual attraction), panromantic (romantically, but not sexually attracted to others regardless of gender), demisexual (only experiencing

sexual attraction once an emotional bond has been formed), sex-positive (open to sexual expression in others without desiring sex themselves), repulsed (either by the idea of sex or by sex as a possibility), or some other of the many subcategories (AVENwiki). It's worth noting that even sexual experience would not be valid as a determining factor. Both activists and scholars emphasize the point that "some asexual people have sex regularly [and] some asexual people are in relationships" (Bogaert 242). Such people's former or current physical practices do not preclude them from identification with any of those asexual identifications. The one shared characteristic of these different subcategories is lack. Some characteristic of sexual attraction—however it is defined—is partially or wholly lacking. Ela Przybylo, in the introduction to *Asexual Erotics*, argues that asexuality can be understood as queer because this lack positions it as a challenge to normative conceptions of sexuality, "or the idea that that all 'healthy' and 'normal' people need to have sex" (8).

Przybylo's argument seems logical and simple enough, but—just like "asexual"—the term queer is anything but straightforward. Lee Edelman asserts that queer theory is categorized by a perverse refusal "of every substantialization of identity" and positions "the queer" as the figure of this refusal (*No Future* 4). In Jack Halberstam's theoretical approach, "queer lives exploit some potential for a *difference in form*...as a possibility embedded in the break from heterosexual life narratives...where the new [would begin] afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition, and usable pasts" (70). In other words, to be queer is to clean one's ideological slate, clearing the way for whatever new conceptions of success and fulfillment may arise in their place. Mari Ruti's understanding of queer theory—as presented in *The Ethics of Opting Out*—is more rebellious, and perhaps less

privileged or idealistic, than Halberstam's. She describes queer theory's stance as one of negativity, which "offers a resounding *No!*" to the neoliberal culture of positivity that characterizes contemporary American society (3). The queer figure, in this framework, becomes a "defiant subject," one who rejects the normative order's promise of happiness (19). Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, though it doesn't use the term queer, is considered to be one of the queer theory's foundational texts. Her approach seems like a precursor to Edelman's, involving the breakdown of established categories and boundaries based on the idea that "no one can know in advance where the limits of a gay-centered inquiry are to be drawn" (53). Each scholar takes a different approach, but two overarching characteristics of all of those conceptions of queerness. First, queerness—as it is employed in queer theoretical discussions—challenges ideas of what is normal or expected. Second, the objectives of these discussions go far beyond a promotion of queer sexual attraction or sexual practices. In fact, sex itself often goes unmentioned, or mentioned only in passing, in queer theoretical texts.

To get a better sense of the difference between sexuality in a queer theoretical sense and sexuality as it is used in general discourse (in which it is generally limited to discussions of attractions and practices), it would be useful to have an understanding of how sexuality is deployed in the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework employed by many theorists. In his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan traces his own use of the word sexuality back to Freud: "Freud said somewhere that he could have described his doctrine as an erotics, but...didn't do it, because that would have involved giving ground relative to words...[Freud] thus spoke of a theory of sexuality" (84). This isn't selective memory on Lacan's part; Freud made it clear that his discussions of sexuality were meant to go

beyond concrete sexual attractions and practices. He points out that in Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, sexual drive is "in the first instance independent of its object; nor is its origin likely to be due to its object's attractions" (Freud 83). After Lacan makes that semantic note, he laments that "things haven't been able to move beyond this point." Although he continues Freud's use of the term sexuality in discussions of desire, he makes a point of minimizing the importance of both sexual orientation and the sexual act in those discussions, speaking more broadly about "whatever is open, lacking, or gaping at the center of our desire" (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 84). During the seminar's first meeting, he takes issue with the "genitalization of desire" in psychoanalysis, suggesting in the same thought a shift to "the investigation of what should properly be called an erotics" (8). He calls (straight male) love the "sublimation of the female object," offering courtly love as "an exemplary form" of this sublimation, where the female object is raised to a level of impossible perfection as a substitute for the impossible, mythical object—referred to, depending on the seminar, as *Das Ding* or *objet a*—that would fully satisfy the subject's desire (109, 128). So when desire is discussed within Lacanian psychoanalysis, even when it is described using the term sexual and even when it refers to the desire of one human for another, that desire is at its core fully removed from actual sex.

Queer theorists working within a psychoanalytic framework tend to understand the distinction between the way the term "sexual" is used in common parlance and the way it is used in psychoanalysis, and brilliant discussions have been generated as a result. Alenka Zupančič's *What is Sex?*, for example, "comes from the conviction that in psychoanalysis, sex is above all a concept that formulates a persisting contradiction of

reality and cannot be reduced to a secondary level” (3). When she writes that sex “cannot be reduced to a secondary level,” Zupančič means sex cannot be understood simply in terms of the physical act of copulation. Her argument extends to the term sexuality, opposing its “reduction to (different) sexual practices” (6). In psychoanalytic discussions, sex and sexuality must always be understood at the concept level—in terms of meaning-making, *objet-a*-seeking expressions of desire. The dual use of the word can be confusing, especially since texts which talk about sex, or the sexual, at both the secondary and the concept level often do not overtly distinguish between levels.

At both levels, though, incorporating asexuality seems to fit with the major objectives of queer theory. Ela Przybylo and Benjamin Kahan have posited that the existence of asexuality (at the secondary level) is a challenge to compulsory sexuality, “the belief that sex and sexuality are core components of being human” (Przybylo 4) The term is a modification of Adrienne Rich’s “compulsory heterosexuality,” used to describe the patriarchal ideology that sees “heterosexuality as the ‘natural’ emotional and sensual inclination for women” (Rich 652). This etymology draws attention to the potential of secondary level asexuality to add to the work done by discussions of homosexuality in challenging ideas of what is normal or expected. Working to understand asexuality at the psychoanalytic concept level would present theorists with the opportunity to do the groundbreaking theoretical work of unpacking what it would mean to be lacking in desire in the psychoanalytic sense.

1.3 A Striking Elision

Considering the similarity of objectives between queer theory and the establishment of asexuality as a valid form of queer expression, one would think that

queer theorists would be ahead of the curve in embracing asexuality. Because of that, the assertion of Cerankowski and Milks that they “chided the slow approach in feminist and queer academic circles to acknowledge asexuality as a scholarly object” is a surprising one (2). Nevertheless, an examination of the same works that put forth anti-normativity as a major objective of queer theory reveals a striking elision of asexuality as an identity or even a possibility. *No Future*, a queer attack on the idea of reproductive futurity, never discusses the potential of asexuality to disrupt the heteronormative link between sex and reproduction. Edelman builds on the idea that restraint, convention, and discipline are all linked to heteronormative sexuality, implying that such sexuality is dependent on a limitation of sexual enjoyment (143). His “de-meaning” *sinthomosexuality* is based on the idea that the limitations imposed by heteronormativity should be overcome through “the loss of control in jouissance” (Edelman 143). Whether that jouissance, or satisfaction of desire, is being understood at the secondary or conceptual level in terms of sexuality, the emphasis placed on excess as the site of real rebellion makes asexuality complicit in the imposition heteronormative limitations. *The Queer Art of Failure*, which separates queerness from overt sexuality through its discussion of children’s movies and ultimately concludes that queer subjects should “revel in...failures” rather than “resisting...limits,” at no point mentions asexuality (understood by much of the general public to be the failure of sexuality) (Halberstam 187). Mari Ruti’s *Ethics of Opting Out* focuses on defiant subjects, those who are “able and willing to turn away from the promise of happiness (as conceptualized by the normative order)” (19). Yet the power of these queer subjects never lies in the opting out itself, in the failure to or decision not to desire in a particular way. Rather, their resistance “depends on their ability to desire differently”

(19). She argues that it is specifically through this desiring that queer subjects can be “open to undomesticated realms of experience,” implying that asexuality on its own would be an unimpactful method of opting out unless it were accompanied by some other form of queer desire (since asexuals could have queer desire but the term asexual doesn’t necessarily connote queer desire) (86).

And even though *Epistemology of the Closet* was written before asexuality was used in its modern sense, some of the ideas expressed in that text stand in opposition to such a use ever developing. Though Eve Sedgwick views sexuality as subjective, advocating for the practice of “[giving] as give as much credence as one finds it conceivable to give to self-reports of sexual difference” (both overt and implicit), some statements in the text seem to deny the plausibility of an asexual identity. In writing that “gender and the question of sexuality...can be expressed only in the terms of the other,” she frames the question of sexuality as a matter of direction—never simply degree (30). Asexuality, defined by a lack in terms of sexual attraction, would be expressible without using the language of gender. Additionally, Sedgwick’s analysis of Henry James’ “The Beast in the Jungle” never entertains the notion that John Marcher—a character who never acts upon sexual desire/curiosity—could be anything other than a tragic figure, ignorant of a desire which must exist. Sedgwick writes that, “to alienate conclusively, *definitionally*, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure...the most intimate violence possible...central to the modern history of homophobic oppression” (26). And yet she seems to be implicitly performing that alienation with regard to asexuality.

And so queer theoretical discourse, so frequently credited with being ahead of the curve in its acceptance of new and subversive sexualities, seems conspicuously averse to asexuality (at least in the works of many of its major scholars). This apparent disinclination, though conspicuous, is understandable. Eve Sedgwick, for example, is analyzing a text written by an author who was writing during a time when homophobic discourses would've forced same-sex desire into closets of meaningful silence, an author whose life and works became fodder for homophobic critics who clearly privileged heterosexual interpretations. Sedgwick is writing with the understanding that not seeing silence to be "as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet," is homophobic in itself, and is writing about a text with many silences that relate to a secret—or closet (Sedgwick 4). Finally, "The only imperative that [Sedgwick's] book means to treat as categorical is the very broad one of pursuing an antihomophobic inquiry" (14). Taking all of that into account, it seems impossible that Sedgwick could consider an asexual possibility in "The Beast in the Closet," since doing so would risk hindering her categorical imperative.

The historic imposition of asexuality onto queer desire is just one of many potential reasons why queer theory scholars seem so reluctant to accept asexuality. In *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Annamarie Jagose traces the development of the field back through the gay liberation movement of the early 1970's, known in part for the challenges it posed to "psychiatric and medical models of homosexuality" (Jagose 38). Indeed, the idea of presenting certain conditions—especially sexual conditions—as abnormal or unhealthy runs directly counter to the objectives of queer theory. Unfortunately, every 'condition' of asexuality—aside from the identification itself—is

understood to be the lack of some aspect of sexuality. This means that a system which categorizes sex as healthy will really have to mince words to avoid pathologizing asexuality. Indeed, the term Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder (FSID) is used by the DSM-V to designate a lack of sexual interest or arousal in women with the provision that, “If a lifelong lack of sexual desire is better explained by one’s self-identification as ‘asexual,’ then a diagnosis of sexual interest/arousal disorder would not be made” (434). The provision exists in nearly the same words for Male Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). The term ‘better’ is meaningless in this provision, since an asexual person could be distressed by their asexuality, feel uncertain as to its etiology, not belong to a queer community, still be closeted, or even wish that said asexuality had a ‘cure.’ Thus, based on current diagnostic criteria, the only thing that prevents asexuality from qualifying as a specific disorder is the use of the term, ‘asexual,’ to describe the conditions of that disorder. In other words, the DSM-V not only establishes conditions for a designation (if not an explicit diagnosis) of asexuality but positions asexual identification as the only way to avoid pathologization for people who would otherwise receive a diagnosis of FSID or HSDD. A comparison, though certainly not a parallel, can be made to Judith Butler’s discussion of Gender Identity Disorder in *Undoing Gender* (2004). She writes that queer theory seeks “to insist that sexuality is not easily summarized or unified through categorization” but stresses that the ways in which categories of recognition are necessary for a “livable life” (7). The DSM-V’s mentions of asexuality create a similar bind, since the only way to avoid an arousal disorder diagnosis from one’s physician could be associate oneself with the summarized and unified asexuality presented in the FSID and HSDD entries.

The subversive potential of queer sex itself is another reason why queer theorists writing in opposition to heteronormative structures or ideologies would be hesitant to build arguments around asexuality. Edelman's *No Future*, as we've discussed, challenges the assumptions necessary for symbolic law—"the fantasy of survival" and "love's fantasy"—with the figure of the *sinthomosexual*, which insists "on the machine-like work of the partial, dehumanizing drives and [offers] a constant access to their surplus of jouissance" (74). For him, pleasure divorced from the heteronormative fantasies frequently associated with it is the only way to break apart those fantasies. José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, the queer futurity manifesto, often positioned as a rebuttal to *No Future*'s queer negativity, nevertheless also works with the idea that queer subversion must express *something* different from what it subverts. In the introduction, Muñoz writes that he sees "an unlimited potentiality in actual queer sex" (18). Although Muñoz by no means limits his discussion to sex alone, he does put forth as a structuring idea that "[q]ueerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmires of the present" (1). Queer challenges to the quagmires of the present are defined in terms of desiring differently and—at times—excessively. A lack of desire (unless accompanied by some alternative form of desire) would not qualify as queerness under this designation.

It seems, then, that there are two main issues with the acceptance of asexuality by queer theorists. The first is that asexuality—as it is commonly understood—may be perfectly viable within a psychoanalytic framework, since an asexual subject could still be discussed in terms of concept-level sexuality. Such a subject would simply not engage in one of many possible forms of sublimation—the secondary sexual—but would

potentially engage in any of the of other forms of sublimation. In that case, their asexuality would have no more significance than a disinclination to play sports or listen to music. An asexual subject would, just like any other subject, sublimate in some ways but not in others. The second main issue is that for queer theorists in general, acknowledging the concept of asexuality does not imply a productive use of said concept. When the theoretical goal is related to opting out of or subverting heteronormative structures/expectations, the consensus (unless one is taking a postmodern approach) seems to be that casting off those expectations or challenging those structures is only meaningful when it raises the possibility of an alternative. The queer figures used by such theorists desire differently, pursue different objects. This is the case even for Przybylo, who contends that activities other than the overtly sexual should be equally understood to bear the title of erotic and discusses asexuality in terms of those other erotic activities. All this is to say that asexuality, designating the lack of sexual attraction, is not thought to be productive on its own. It can be acknowledged; but in order to do anything with it, it must be asexuality accompanied by something else, such as sisterhood, intergenerational love, or aging.

The goals of this paper, then, are threefold. First, I intend to situate asexuality within psychoanalysis at the concept level. Using literary and filmic examples that both implicitly and explicitly inform common understandings of asexuality, I will further unpack the culturally constructed meaning(s) of and expectations surrounding asexuality. Through an exploration of these meanings as they present in Lacan's concept of "drive," I will attempt to demonstrate that asexuality's psychoanalytic potential extends beyond the rejection of a specific form of sublimation. Second, I will use these cultural meanings and

psychoanalytic positionings to demonstrate that, although asexuality may not imply different (and subversive) forms of desire, it would be a mistake to argue that it could be reduced to any fundamental sort of lack. Third, I will show some of the ways asexuality—both in its specific psychoanalytic conceptualizations and as a sexuality that is often mistakenly reduced to lack—could be used productively within queer theoretical discourse.

It also warrants noting, before the end of this chapter, that not all of the figures used will present as asexual at first glance. The figures were all created before asexuality's current use as an identity category, and they were created in a culture of compulsory sexuality. The significance of the latter fact is that providing readers or audiences with endings considered to be happy or significant often entails rehabilitating these asexual characters—allowing them to uncover or develop their sexuality to the extent that they become distinctly allosexual (i.e. non-asexual) characters. These figures were chosen for a number of reasons. They represent culturally defined, repetitive tropes of asexuality. Specifically, the ways in which they represent a lack of sexuality were prevalent and compelling enough to inform understandings of asexuality—both within the asexual community and outside of it. They illustrate the necessity of embracing the methods of queer expression in popular characters even when that queerness is later denied. Finally, they aid in the creation of an asexual canon which includes major works from different genres and time periods—as opposed to a canon built from the small selection of recent works that contain explicitly asexually-identified characters.

CHAPTER 2: ASEXUAL DRIVES

2.1 What about desire?

The first step in situating asexuality at the concept level within psychoanalysis is fully grasping what it means to be sexual at the concept level. We know from Zupančič's explanation of psychoanalytic terminology that language regarding the sexual and desire extends far beyond questions of physical sex and attraction. We also know that, insofar as these terms reference our attempts to fill holes and find satisfaction in the abstract sense, they are integral to the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. Lacan affirms this numerous times, going so far as to conclude the introduction to his sixth seminar by telling listeners, "Analytic theory is thus thoroughly based on the notion of libido—that is, on the energy of desire" (4). Subjects in psychoanalytic theory, it would seem, must be discussed in terms of desire. The question then becomes whether a concept-level asexual subject could exist as someone lacking in desire, or if such asexual subject in that sense is a contradiction in terms—since subjects must be discussed in terms of desire.

Lacan, in his sixth seminar, indicates that desire is fundamental to one's placement in the symbolic order (the world as it can be understood in terms of words and symbols):

"From the very first moment of its appearance, at its very origin, desire, *d*, is manifested in the interval or gap that separates the pure and simple linguistic articulation of speech from what marks the fact that the subject actualizes something of himself in it, something that has no scope or meaning except with respect to the production of speech, and that is his being—what language calls 'being'" (17).

The employment of meaning in the most basic sense falls under the purview of desire. Desire is what gives us place and purpose within the symbolic order. It covers everything from the recognition of our internal selves in speech to the designation of some larger goal as the key to our fulfillment. For Lacan, the relations between subjects and object “are relations of desire” (84).

According to Kristian Kahn, in what appears to be the only published essay on psychoanalytic asexuality, an asexual subject *can* be understood as lacking in desire. Kahn’s goals, “to redress this critical absence [of asexuality in queer theoretical discourse] by fleshing out the queer potential of asexuality within psychoanalysis,” mirror my own (56). He begins by making a distinction between the child “who is introduced into the realm of language” in Lacan’s framework and the asexual, who is able to reject “the heteronormative (and, indeed, other forms of normative) sexuality that is the teleological aim of both symbolization and sexuation” (57). The asexual, in this context, is someone who is born outside of the realm of language and is not beholden to it for their self-actualization. As a continued challenge to the position of the subject within language, they use a name, or signifier, that “signifies nothing”—because asexuality signifies lack (63). Asexual subjects, in this framework, are to be considered as “autoerotic or self-containing,” free from the pursuit of external objects of desire and existing “beyond the pleasure principle” (65).

Asexuality, as Kahn shows, can be conceptualized as the lack of psychoanalytic desire. But an asexual subject defined in this way bears little resemblance to any lived experience. A subject existing beyond the pleasure principle would not be able to experience pleasure and unpleasure (*Ethics* 58). They would have no relation to objects

external to themselves (*Desire* 84). And, since the symbolic order encompasses interpersonal communication, they would not be able to articulate their position in any understandable way. Kahn's asexual figure works more as a challenge to the facets that characterize a subject in psychoanalysis than as the situation of a real person, identity, or position within psychoanalysis. It is likely because of this that this figure is not mapped onto any literary examples or real people, nor is it linked to any distinct practices that would be available to readers. Although Kahn's is an impressive theoretical exercise, it is unlikely to help in the establishment and acceptance of an asexual canon or a concrete asexual figure to be used in queer theoretical discourse and does not add to representations of actual asexual experience.

Even if a psychoanalytic subject cannot be clearly conceptualized as lacking in desire, the subject's sexuality can still be discussed in terms of how that desire is expressed, because there is a structure for the expression of desire. Desire is ultimately aimed at *das Ding*, the impossible object, "found at the most as something missed," which would provide full and permanent satisfaction both at the linguistic level (the perfect word for a given meaning) and the subject level (a sense of true fulfillment) (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 62). But when Lacan discusses *das Ding*, he clarifies that "if he is to follow the path of his pleasure, man must go around it" (95). Desire positions different objects within the symbolic order as potential keys to fulfillment—also known as sublimation, raising "an object to the dignity of the thing"—its goal being the attainment of *das Ding* (112). Since *das Ding* is impossible, desire continues to fail. The structure that commits desire to one pursuit after another—while keeping *das Ding* as a reference point for sublimation—is known as drive, best described by Žižek as a circuit

which “generate[s] satisfaction through repetition of failure, endless circling around the object” (Žižek 63). A functioning drive requires multiple components, the positioning of *das Ding*, the route taken (or different objects of sublimation chosen) around *das Ding*, and the force of continuation from one object to the next (fig. 1).

Drive, in part, works so well for a discussion of asexuality because asexuality does not refer to any one thing. There is not one specific aspect of sexuality which is thought to be uniquely determinative of asexuality when lacking. In the same way drive is composed of multiple components—thrust, object, and aim—all of which must operate in a certain way in order for a drive to be considered to be functioning within the symbolic order.

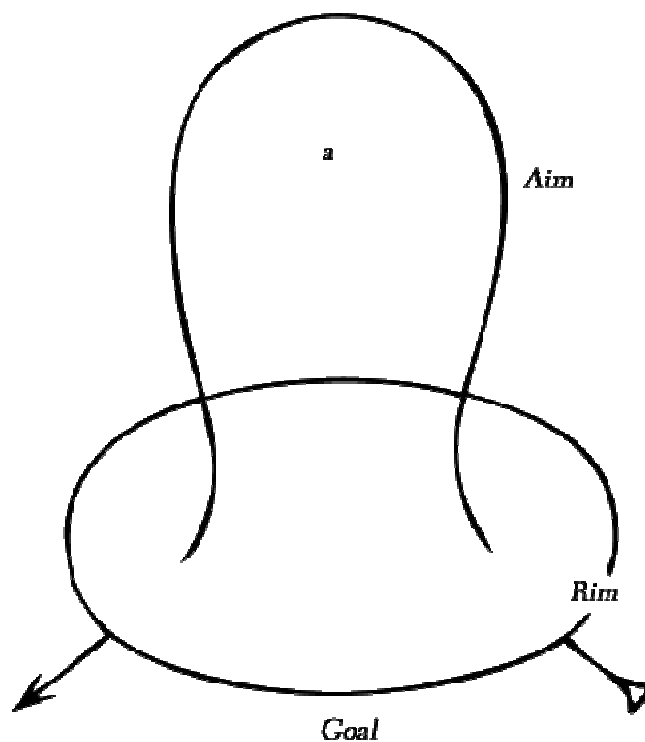


Figure 1: Lacan's illustration of drive

Discussing representations of asexuality can be tricky because any such representations that don't use the term asexual fail to fully adhere the concept of asexuality as identity. As AVEN's home page proclaims to all potential new members, "Asexuality is like any other identity – at its core it's just a word that people use to help figure themselves out, then communicate that part of themselves to others. If you find the word asexual useful to describe yourself, you may certainly identify as asexual" (AVEN). Of course, fictional characters cannot truly identify themselves as anything and—unless we're limiting our discussion to a small selection of book and shows made in the last decade by writers who both actively recognize the potential for asexuality in characters and dig deeply enough into the causes of their characters' behaviors to open the space for such a potential—their creators would not have identified them as asexual. In "Towards an Asexual Narrative Structure," Elizabeth Hanna Hanson writes that we can only search for "the asexual possibility" in such characters because "scholarship predicated on identity politics is widely regarded in literature as reductive, particularly when the literature one proposes to study predates the genesis of one's preferred identity by at least a century" (346). Thus, in the same way that the queer canon works with texts that predate the invention of homosexuality as an identity, the asexual canon must be allowed to include works that inform and correspond to current understandings of asexuality—even if those works don't showcase asexual-identified characters and even if writers frame those asexualities as conditions which can be 'rectified' over the course of the characters' narrative arcs.

Since there aren't objective criteria for a definition of asexuality—and since there are "many aspects and types of asexual identification and experiences...[which are]

not possible to contain within one definition,” an analysis of asexual representations meant to introduce such representations into queer theoretical discourse should include different conceptions of asexuality (Przybylo 4). This fits perfectly with Lacan’s conception of drive as a structure with multiple components. In the next two sections of this chapter, I intend to unpack the ways in which variations in different components of drive connect with different conceptions of asexuality. Each figure and corresponding psychoanalytic variation will be based on an understanding (or misunderstanding) of asexuality prevalent in contemporary discourse. Beyond situating the asexualities of those figures in a psychoanalytic framework, the fact that some of those variations present in no way as deficiency will set the stage for a psychoanalytic challenge to the idea of asexuality as an identity based in lack and an argument that difference is the most definitive term that could be used.

2.2 What do they do instead?

This chapter will work to situate asexuality in psychoanalysis beyond a simple understanding of asexuality as the rejection of a specific form of sublimation (that of secondary-level sex), but sublimation is nevertheless one of the necessary components of a Lacan concept of drive. Understanding asexuality in terms of variations in the components of drive, then, does call for an examination of its relationship with sublimation. Desire—at least as it exists within the symbolic order—is linear and destined to fail. In Lee Edelman’s words, “[s]ymbolic desire... commits us to pursuing fulfillment by way of meaning unable, as meaning, either to fulfill us or to be fulfilled” (13). Each manifestation of this desire leads us to another signifier (e.g. a grade, a car, a house, a marriage). Each manifestation relies on fantasy, which “provides a ‘scheme’

according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire, filling in the empty spaces opened by the symbolic structure” (Žižek 40). Each iteration of desire is an instance of sublimation, the process that, as we know, “raises an object...to the dignity of the Thing” (Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 112). Since the object is not truly the Thing, or *das Ding*, each iteration of desire is destined to fail. But drive takes those successive failures in stride; “its (true) aim is the continuation of this circulation as such” (Žižek 63). Sublimation is at the core of this structure. The tendency to pursue different signifiers as if they were *das Ding* and substitute in new ones when those pursuits fail to provide fulfillment is what allows drive to exist as a circuit. An unsublimated drive would be impossible because *das Ding*, as we know (and will explore further in 2.4), is only defined in absence. It provides no shape for the circuit of drive. Such shape is determined entirely by the ways in which sublimation is employed. As Lacan says in *Desire and Its Interpretations* that “drive is this very form [of sublimation], that “the drive can ultimately be reduced to the pure play of the signifier. Which is how we define sublimation as well” (484). In other words, the assignment of meaning and significance to objects within the symbolic order that characterizes sublimation is what determines the form taken by drive.

The tricky part about discussions of sublimation is that scholars frequently use the Freudian definition of the term without acknowledging that it is substantially different from Lacan’s. Freud, whose notion of drives did not include Lacan’s concept of *das Ding*, first introduced “sublimated” as a synonym for “diverted”—later specifying that he was referring to the process by which “sexual impulses...[are] diverted, wholly or in great part, from their sexual use and directed to other ends” (*Three Essays on Sexuality*,

22, 44). Sam Gillespie, in “Giving Form to its Own Existence: Anxiety and the Subject of Truth,” concisely explains Lacan’s modification of Freud’s account of sublimation. He acknowledges that “sublimation is conventionally taken [as Freud presents it] to be the desexualization of libido in and through the production of scientific and artistic objects and knowledge,” but goes on to describe Lacan’s radical move as the unification of “the two terms—drive and sublimation—in the very notion of an object (a): in each case, it is the activity of the subject that gives form to the object as satisfaction” (*Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 175). The activities of the subject serve as sublimation at the same level in this model, unlike the Freudian model in which activities that don’t involve secondary sexuality serve as sublimations of sexual urges.

Likely due to both the sexual imperative and a conflation of Freudian and Lacanian conceptions of sublimation—many scholars employing psychoanalytic language still understand sublimation to involve the transference of sexual impulses into nonsexual practices. In an article meant to introduce psychoanalytic concepts to a lay audience, Jonah Dempcy attributes to Lacan the idea that “language is sublimated libido” (n.p) A reliance on the Freudian conception of sublimation comes across frequently in discourse surrounding expressions of sexuality. In an article entitled, “Sex and Mysticism,” Ignacio Gotz describes the practices of ascetics, philosophers, and nuns as “examples of [a] kind of mystical sublimation of sexuality” (15). Zygmunt Bauman begins his essay, “On Postmodern Uses of Sex,” by discussing the “infinitely variable...erotic sublimation of sex” (19). He goes on to assert that “sexually reproducing species are as a rule supplied with quantities of sexual energy...far in advance of what

reproduction would require, indicating that those who don't pursue explicitly sexual acts are simply sublimating all of their sexual energy (20).

In part because of this rhetoric, some scholars have gone further, describing asexuality as a cover for—or sublimation of—(secondary) sexual desire. A passage in Shane Vogel's 2006 essay, "Closing Time: Langston Hughes and the Queer poetics of Harlem Nightlife," talks about how Arnold Rampersad "advanced the thesis that Hughes was basically asexual" and goes on to point out that "[s]everal critics subsequently accused [Rampersad's] work of closeting Hughes through this insistence on Hughes's asexuality" (398). The implication here is not simply that asexual forms of sublimation are sublimations *of* sexual desire and that this sublimation—taken too far—closets authentic sexual desire; it is also that asexual readings don't qualify as queer readings and are themselves closeting.

The language of sexual sublimation has become so prevalent that it appears numerous times on AVEN's message boards. User kuro_cayal begins a thread entitled "sublimation" by asking other community members, "Does anyone else find themselves sublimating/substituting something else for the sexual act?" Others in the thread answer in the affirmative, offering acts like self-inflicting pain and physical exercise as their methods of sublimation. A separate thread, "Asexual Sublimation and Physical Attractiveness," unfolds in much the same way until a user by the handle Homer interjects, "I think that's utter nonsense. I bet any given person could find 150 things they're not interested in, but somehow sex is supposed to be special and [all] the energy one doesn't use for partnered genital stimulation goes elsewhere?" This comment only

ends the use of Freud's conception of sublimation, by presenting Lacan's (in which secondary sex is a form of sublimation at the same level as other forms) as more logical.

Even within the asexual community, people struggle with the idea of sublimating sexuality. Outside of that community, such understandings of asexuality are even more ingrained. *Archie Comics'* Jughead, a canonically asexual character, was recently identified as such by Chip Zdarsky, writer of the spin-off *Jughead* comic series.

Describing himself as “a hero who doesn't like to be touched” and lamenting the extent to which his peers are “hobbled by hormonal impulses,” Jughead has been lauded by readers for providing a humorous and compelling representation of asexuality (Zdarsky 4, 6). But Jughead is hobbled. His obsession with hamburgers has often blinded him to other concerns and relationships within the *Archie* comics and has propelled B-story lines forward. In the *Jughead* series, as well, he responds to a classmate's romantic advances with the line, “My heart belongs to food” (8).

Using language of love and sexuality in discussions of food could easily be read as evidence of the sublimation of sexual impulses into the pursuit of food. This reading is not an uncommon one. In an article for comic news outlet, *The Beat*, Heidi MacDonald writes in favor of Jughead's asexual identification but describes it in terms of sexual sublimation. The identification, she writes, “certainly fits in with Jughead's long association with being dorky around girls and, perhaps, sublimating sexual urges to things like eating fries” (n.p.) Readings like this help explain Jughead's sexualization in The CW's *Archie* adaptation, *Riverdale*—a show meant to dramatize the comic's storylines and add depth to its characters. In the show, Jughead is depicted as a gloomy, tortured teenager, struggling with homelessness and dysfunctional family dynamics—

digging beneath the flip demeanor he presents in the comics to give depth to his character. In the same effort, the show's writers position Betty as a love interest for Jughead—digging beneath what they may have seen as his sublimated desire for food. The move received substantial backlash from fans for its asexual erasure, but this seems to be largely related to the explicit identification of Jughead as asexual.

In general, the practice of digging beneath the surface of characters who don't present secondary sexuality is accepted in adaptations as a way of making those characters more fleshed-out and sympathetic. Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* film series, Fox's *Lucifer*, Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd*, and Starz's *Da Vinci's Demons* are all examples of modern adaptations "uncovering" and exploring the sexualities of characters who have traditionally presented as asexual, which have faced little to no pushback.

Da Vinci's example may be the most compelling because Freud's psychoanalytic unpacking of the artist's life—in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*—is where his idea of sublimated sexuality most clearly comes into focus. After praising Da Vinci's intelligence, appearance, and character, Freud presents the problem that will guide his essay: "If a biographical study is really intended to arrive at an understanding of its hero's mental life, it must not...pass over its subject's sexual activity or sexual individuality...[and yet] Leonardo represented the cool repudiation of sexuality" (69). Freud both describes and speculates on Da Vinci's apparent aversion to sex, as well as ascribing some of his artistic failures to "sexual repression" (70). The main point of the essay, though, is that "Leonardo was not devoid of passion...he had merely converted his passion into a thirst for knowledge" (74). His devotion to research was in fact the release of "what were originally sexual instinctual forces" (77). This is key. Underlying Da

Vinci's nonsexual research (and Sherlock's investigations, and Lucifer's scheming, and Jughead's gastrophilia) is a sexual force—a compressed, contorted, transformed, but at its core sexual, force.

Freud credits Da Vinci with the “rarest and most perfect” type of sexual repression (80). It is neither inhibited nor neurotic compulsive but is the “[sublimation of] the greater part of his libido into an urge for research” (80). Freud doesn't frame this sublimation as a negative, but he certainly pathologizes it—indicating that natural sexual impulses are repressed and diverted. Leonardo, and other sublimated asexuals, are thus missing the free-flowing sexuality that should be present for them and are open to rehabilitation at the hands of those adaptation screenwriters who are willing to put in the speculative legwork.

2.3 Do they still know how to thrust?

In Lacan's words, thrust can be identified with “the mere tendency to discharge.” (163). But as he discusses the term further, it becomes clear that thrust is more than the tendency to discharge; it is the discharge of the drive itself. He describes it as “a constant force” and at one point uses it interchangeably with the circular motion of drive (194). Freud says something almost identical in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” describing thrust, or pressure, as the “motor factor” of a drive (122). Thrust propels us from one object in the symbolic order to another, linking the iterations of desire which compose the structure of drive. In common parlance, thrust is often considered to be correctly deployed only when it is connected with a predetermined direction—incorrectly deployed by, say, since a baseball that pegs a spectator in the face or a rocket that plunges into the sea. Psychoanalytic thrust, on the other hand, is considered to be functioning regardless

of what goal or object it pushes a subject towards. This thrust “turns failure into triumph...[since] the true aim of drive is not to reach its goal but to circulate endlessly around it” (Žižek 63). It is the scalar (i.e. concerned with magnitude but not, in itself, with direction) force behind drive.

One common conception of asexuality is that of a figure lacking in this sort of thrust. Such a figure is most easily understood through the trope of the asexual depressive. Teenagers or young adults in the throes of a depressive episode will frequently be portrayed as lacking the motivations to pursue sexual activities, as well as all other activities. The clearest and most common representations of this trope are limited to younger characters not only because the contrast between the depressive state and ‘normal’ levels of energy is most pronounced in these cases, but because similar representations in older characters would likely be subsumed under the tropes of middle-aged ennui or elderly exhaustion/alienation. Silver in *90210*, Gretchen in *You’re the Worst*, and Shakespeare’s Hamlet are a few of the many famous fictional characters in romantic relationships whose intimacy with their partners—along with their motivation to act/meet expectations in other areas of life—is stalled or challenged by depression.

In the thread “Asexual, or Just Depressed,” on asexuality.org, users share experiences of opening up about their sexuality only to be told by trusted friends and authority figures that they were likely “just depressed.” While some users on the thread rail against the damaging potential of such comments, others speculate about the rationale behind this misdiagnosis. For user, Interpol, “it’s worth noting that one of the side effects of depression is a lack of interest in relationships.” Prisma posts that “[d]epression does decrease [secondary] sexual drive a lot.” For her, the distinction lies in her idea that

depression can't engender a "complete" lack of "sex drive." Said distinction, though, is far from airtight since gray-asexuality—which refers to the spectrum between asexuality and sexuality and includes a range of identities under the asexuality umbrella—is commonly defined by the feeling of low levels of sexual attraction that are generally not intense enough to act upon (Bogaert 245). Within this community, the salient distinction between asexuality and depression seems to involve the fundamental feature of asexual identification; as oBreeze writes in the thread's final post, "You're the only one who can define yourself."

Novels like Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* reveal the process through which conceptions of asexuality are conflated with and informed by understandings of depression in characters distinguished by a lack of thrust. The novel begins with nineteen-year-old Esther Greenwood spending the first month of her summer in New York, working a prestigious internship at fashionable magazine, feeling very out of place. At first appearance, she fits the same bill as her peers—chic, driven, possessing (like everyone else) of a unique gimmick that allows her to be distinguished from the other members of "the prettiest, smartest bunch of women [*Ladies' Day Magazine*] has yet had the good luck to meet" (25). Still, from the beginning, Esther recognizes that she "[isn't] steering anything, not even [her]self" (2). Although there are a few instances in the novel's first couple of chapters where Esther initiates activities with her friends—attempting to stave off the feeling of missing out—she soon realizes the futility of this behavior. On what would have been one of the busiest days of her internship, she decides to "lie in bed as long as [she wants]," wondering as she does so "why [she] couldn't go the whole way doing what [she] should anymore" (29-30). Esther becomes less and less

active in the days leading up to her suicide attempt as it becomes “more and more difficult for [her] to decide to do anything” (104). Assigning specific activities to this umbrella of ‘anything,’ is irrelevant, since no activity would truly lead her to *das Ding*, “the mythical object whose encounter would bring about true satisfaction of the drive” (Edelman 58). Drive, as we know, is not designed to be truly satisfied but to push the subject from one temporary object, or goal, to another. It appears in this case that the thrust, the active energy, behind Esther’s drive is missing.

Perhaps more interesting is the way in which Esther, a straight-identified character—who goes so far as to express interest in pursuing sexual experiences—is coded as asexual. The fact that Esther pursues sex and, towards the end of the text, has it, seems to position her as allosexual (i.e. non-asexual) and possessing of a drive with plenty of thrust (a thrust specifically directed towards sex). Since behavior itself is not determinative of asexual identity, the key is not to get caught up in the fact that Esther engages in sexual behavior, but to consider the ways in which that behavior may not fit with allosexual standards. Esther describes her first kiss with her long-term boyfriend, Buddy, as “dry” and “uninspiring,” sentiments that create a stark contrast when juxtaposed with Buddy’s reaction to the kiss— “Wow, it makes me feel terrific to kiss you” (Plath 61). When she sees him naked for the first time, “all [she] can think of [is] turkey neck and turkey gizzard and [she feels] very depressed” (69). She is upset by the realization that physical intimacy and nudity do not excite her in the way they seem to excite Buddy and do not feel like a necessary or desirable continuation of their relationship. She ends up losing her virginity to a man who she believes will be able to act as “a kind of impersonal, priestlike official, as in tales of tribal rites” (228). Sex itself

is pursued as an impersonal act, divorced from the concepts of interpersonal intimacy or sexual attraction. In that sense, Esther is portrayed as lacking in terms of sexual attraction.

We still have the problem of Esther's pursuit of sex—ostensibly an illustration of active thrust. Buddy's initial draw for her is based on the idea that if he falls in love with her, she "wouldn't have to worry about what [she] was doing on any more Saturday nights for the rest of the year" (Plath 61). When he contracts tuberculosis, she feels "a wonderful relief" because she doesn't have to actively engage in their relationship or "start the boring business of blind dates all over again" (73). When she finally prepares to have sex, she thinks of it as "freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong persons," freedom from all the expectations of her that seem to accompany virginity (222). Once she stops being single (especially once her partner is remote) and once she loses her virginity, expectations for what she should do and should become fall away. Her freedom is a freedom from the pursuit of specific goals and activities. Thus, even her pursuit of sexual experiences supports her larger lack of thrust.

The Bell Jar's focus on Esther's lack of thrust is frequently read as a critique of the fantasies of neoliberal capitalism. Steven Axelrod, in "Alienation and Renewal in *The Bell Jar*," reads Esther's experience at the beginning of the novel as social alienation. She had spent her life pursuing external goals, like a prestigious career or an advantageous marriage, but "[i]n pursuing them unthinkingly, she had simply interiorized society's norms for women" (136). When she begins to look at those norms critically, "she becomes a stranger in society and to herself" (136). She stops pursuing normative success because she has realized that this pursuit is externally motivated. Similarly, in "Plath's

Bell Jar as Female Bildungsroman,” Linda Wagner asserts that “Plath structures the novel to show the process of disenchantment in rapid acceleration” (56). The activities and relationships meant to help Esther achieve clarity and happiness are revealed in quick succession to provide nothing more than confusion and frustration.

Esther’s disillusionment functions as the collapse of her cruel optimism, a term coined by Lauren Berlant to describe our investment in “life-building modalities that can no longer be said to be doing their work and that indeed become obstacles to the nourishing of the subjects whose optimism animates them” (23). This is the promise of fulfillment through heteronormative success, even when pursuit of such success is painful or self-destructive. In Esther’s case, cruel optimism is what binds her to fantasies about the happiness she will have as a writer and professor, keeping her on a set goal-oriented path, even though her experience writing for the fashion magazine is unpleasant and she describes classes as requiring “a horrible will of effort” (Plath 35). Those fantasies underpin her understanding of herself, make her feel as though she’s part of something, and help her survive a harsh reality. Esther cannot conceive a life which diverges from the dominant happiness script, but it starts to seem like following such a script may not be possible. She feverishly tries out replacement goals for the summer—writing a novel, learning shorthand, transferring to a different college—before giving up on all of them. Her disillusionment snowballs, and even the smallest goals start to seem impossible. When she tries to write, “[her] hand [makes] big jerky letters like those of a child” (130). At this point, it is impossible for her to maintain her fantasy of becoming a famous writer, and so she abandons the fantasy.

This abandonment is what brings about Esther as a figure lacking in thrust, as explored earlier. But further developments in the narrative end that positioning and set her up for analysis in the light of Mari Ruti's theory of opting out. In *The Ethics of Opting Out*, Ruti argues that Lacan was "interested in what it would mean for the subject to disentangle itself from the discourse of the Other" (i.e. the symbolic order) without obliterating themselves (Ruti 53). Such subject would no longer experience drive as a circuit of failed desires in the symbolic order, but as a set of desires that were distinctly their own. The symbolic order, at least in the feelings of confinement it engenders for her, is captured through the metaphor of the bell jar. Esther describes this as the structure that traps in her own head, unable to focus on anything besides her fantasies, expectations, and perceived inaccuracies—"stewing in [her] own sour air" (185). She recognizes that the conventions and expectations of society determine the shape of the bell jar, acknowledging that the other girls at her college sit under bell jars themselves. After Esther receives her first ETC treatment, the first thing she notices upon going outside is that "the bell jar [hangs], suspended, a few feet above [her] head" (215). She is no longer confined by her old subjectivity or neoliberal fantasies of success. Soon after her shock treatment, she describes herself as "perfectly free" and ends the novel heading toward a future in which "all [she] could see were question marks" (245). She becomes a desiring, thrusting subject by the end, rehabilitating her asexuality even though the direction/goal of her newly rediscovered desire remains unclear.

Conceptions of asexuality built around thrust are not limited to the trope of the depressive, unthrusting, asexual. In fact, the trope of the asexual career woman—understandable in terms of an excess of thrust—comes to play in popular and academic

discourse, as well as narratives of asexual possibility. Women in this model pursue status, financial success, and the objectives of their given employer with such fervor that they are unable—as a result of either busyness or mindset—to focus any attention on connecting with others sexually. The deployment of this trope, just like that of the depressed asexual, does not necessitate the use of a character who is romantically uninvolved or who never has sex. But the relationship, as we will see, is often presented as a status-based pursuit and the significance of the sex (if there is any) is minimized.

The association of the word asexual with the career woman trope stretches from depictions of early twentieth-century women, who may not have had avenues for sexual exploration easily available to them outside the bounds of marriage, to depictions of contemporary women whose careers do not necessarily preclude them from sexual encounters or marriage. In *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, June Meyerowitz describes the social position of prewar career women as one in which they were “castigated primarily as asexual gender traitors” (359). Sarah Pomeroy, in *Goddesses, Women, Whores, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, writes that one of the major archetypes available to modern women is the “intellectual, asexual career woman” (9). The trope certainly appears in academic contexts, but it is also common in less formal discussions of ‘career women.’ In an online article from *The Atlantic*, “The Asexual, ‘Masculinized’ Career Woman” is listed as one of ten dangerous and prevalent stereotypes for women with Hilary Clinton offered as an example (Doll). Although the majority of these women would not identify with the label, asexual, the trope is prevalent enough to inform understandings of asexuality.

The present-day association of the terms career woman and asexual seems to have its roots in both a shared descriptor and popular—especially in film—representation. Susan Thornham, in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, examines “the many films in which the woman is naturally ‘frigid’ and must be ‘brought around’ by the man” (16). She traces this romantic comedy structure back to the career woman comedies of the 1950’s. The term frigid has been used to pathologize a lack of sexual attraction or expression since the nineteenth century, and AVEN message boards indicate that this pathologization still occurs frequently at the informal level which many expressing some variation of the sentiment that “basically ‘frigid’ is a derogatory term for ‘asexual.’” (“Asexual = Frigid?”). Although the asexual career woman sometimes serves as a foil or cautionary tale for the female lead—like Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*—the trope more often serves as a starting point for the female lead before the movie’s romance transforms her into a less career-driven and more properly sexual figure. Character like Doris Day’s Jan from *Pillow Talk*, Margaret from *The Proposal*, and Abby from *The Ugly Truth* are all characters presented as lacking in sexuality as a result of their focus on career.

An especially fruitful example—because an excess of thrust is presented as extending to life beyond her job—of the asexual career woman as a figure of excessive thrust is Cameron Diaz’s Joy, a Type A equity trader in the 2008 romantic comedy, *What Happens in Vegas*. At the film’s outset, we see her walking with her finance, Mason (played by Jason Sudekis). As she talks about why she chose a specific type of smoothie for their breakfast and lays out their itinerary for Mason’s birthday celebration that evening, he nods along—eyes glued to his phone. The only time he looks up is to half-

jokingly accuse her of “[making] a plan to make a plan” (00:01:20-01:21) After this, we see Joy on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, her excitement palpable as she steels herself for the chaos of the opening bell. Her positioning in these scenes stands in stark contrast with Esther’s. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the pressures and expectations of conventional success, she fully embraces them. Her character seems incapable of spending a day lying in bed, incapable of taking even the smallest break from “doing what [she] should” (Plath 30). When Mason breaks up with her later that day, he justifies his decision by accusing her of being “so on all the time” (00:07:03) All this is to say that Joy, at the start of *What Happens in Vegas*, definitely seems defined by an excess of thrust.

We know that this positioning is by no means uncommon for the female protagonist of a romantic comedy. Kathrina Giltre traces the origins of the career woman comedy to a post-WWII resistance to “the changing role of women in the public sphere” (29). Women in these films are depicted as devoting disproportionate time and energy to their careers, missing out on fulfilling romantic and social lives as a result. The woman in this narrative is overly invested in her career until “into her life comes a man with less public power...who must teach her how to live” (30-31). In *What Happens in Vegas*, the man with less public power who converts Joy to his way of living (even as she helps him become more serious and driven) is a carpenter named Jack, played by Ashton Kutcher.

Our interest in Joy as an asexual figure is limited to her portrayal before this conversion. To the extent that sex is discussed in the context of her relationship with Mason, it seems to be a practice she engages in as a way of maintaining their relationship. This is illustrated during their break-up conversation, when he tells Joy he “really

appreciate[s] all the things [she's] been trying," which—without getting too explicit—are not things most viewers would imagine are pleasurable for her. The lack of expressed affection between them (as well as his status, shown through his expensive suit and large, tasteful Manhattan apartment) indicates that Joy's attachment to him is more as an achievement than a person. This is more directly shown later on when, in contrasting him with Jack, she describes Mason as "serious boyfriend/husband material." Although she is technically sexually active, Joy is not initially presented as significantly connected with or attracted to anyone at the level of sexuality.

But this is a blockbuster romantic comedy with a happy ending, so Joy has to overcome her deficiency. Ela Przybylo's concept of the sexual imperative is extremely useful for illustrating the necessity of Joy's transformation. For Przybylo, "the sexual imperative suggests that sex and sexual identity are integral to one's deepest inner self and that sex is compulsory, for without it one apparently remains deficient in some sense; incomplete; unhealthy" (Przylybo 228). This value system doesn't just require Joy to be having sex; it requires a switch in her priorities. The romantic and sexual passion that comes to characterize her relationship with Jack must have primacy over her attachment to career and status. As with the classic career woman comedies, "love is the cure for the career woman's illness and is... romantic and sexual" (Giltre 32). Compulsory sexuality wins out in the end. Joy quits her job, dramatically asserting that she "would rather do nothing and be happy than do something [she doesn't] love, heavily implying that her time with Jack has shown her that he can make her happy in a way that her job can't. This hardly seems worth noting. As we'll see (and as seems fairly intuitive), compulsory

sexuality wins out in nearly all the popular representations of asexuality that were produced before asexuality gained substantial recognition as an identity.

At first read, these thrust-based asexual conversions (of the depressed asexual and the asexual career woman) seem to have subversive potential on their own—which would place readings that emphasize the initial asexual possibility in opposition with a queer reading based in Ruti’s concept of opting out. Joy’s initial excess of thrust seems equatable to an investment in neoliberal capitalism. Just like in Esther’s case, the demands and expectations of neoliberal capitalism, are offered as the cause of the problematic variations in thrust. Pursuit of one capitalist, heteronormative goal after another is presented as Joy’s problem, the reason why she isn’t yet a (sexually) fulfilled character. As Jack tells her early on in the film—and as she eventually comes to realize herself—“it’s like she’s trying to come in first, but it’s somebody else’s race.” The Rutian reading of both *The Bell Jar* and *What Happens in Vegas* would then be that the problematizing and eventual rectification of variations in thrust can serve encourage audiences to opt of neoliberal capitalism.

Such readings minimize the subversive potential of Joy’s and Esther’s initial asexual positionings and arguably oversimplify the process of opting out. I would argue that Joy isn’t “turning away from the promise of happiness (as conceptualized by the normative order)” (Ruti 19). In keeping with the tenets of the traditional career woman comedy, a distinction is drawn between “how to be a better person [and] how to be a better woman” (Giltre 31). The movie ends with her doubling down on her relationship with Jack, expressing relief that they have plenty of money, and reiterating her intention to support him as he pursues his own ambitions. As far as conceptualizations of

happiness go, this is about as normative as you can get. Something similar can be said of *The Bell Jar*. At first read, Esther seems to fully opt out of the expectations of the normative order. She no longer wants to be a straight-A student, or a wife, or a successful writer. She has “the freedom to find a proper man” and the freedom to succeed on her own terms (223). Even though sex and marriage aren’t explicitly linked to this “proper man” and grades and money aren’t linked to this new kind of success, the fact that Esther is returning to her college, to her classes, to her old dating pool in order to find these things implies that more normative ideas of success lie in wait for her.

Chapter three will readdress these two figures, unpacking their queer subversive potential when embraced as asexual figures not in need of rehabilitation and exploring the fact the both a lack and an excess of thrust can be characterized as asexuality.

2.4 How big are their Things?

Conceptions of asexuality go beyond the depressed asexual and the asexual career woman. In the same way, a functioning drive is composed of more than simply thrust. A drive that functions properly in Lacan’s model never reaches its goal, is never fully satisfied. Each desire that composes its circuit ends in failure. This failure is what allows our desire to focus on another object within the symbolic order. Drive could not be fully satisfied because there is no one object or accomplishment that can permanently satisfy all of our needs and wants, quench all of our desires. Even so, the structure of drive is built around the idea of such an object (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 158). *Das Ding*—referred to in Lacan’s later seminars and by some Lacanian theorists as *object petit a*—is “the mythical object whose encounter would bring about full satisfaction of the drive” (Žižek 99). Such an object is “made to represent the

emptiness at the center of the real” (Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 121). It can only exist theoretically, because our existence within the symbolic order is based on a fundamental lack. To think of oneself in terms of language is to build one’s identity around signifiers that are, at their root, fabricated.

We cannot truly discuss the role of object—or *objet petit a*—in drive because drive never touches this object. It can’t; such an object does not exist in any objective sense. “[I]t exists—its presence can be discerned—only when the landscape is viewed from a certain perspective” (Žižek 18). *Objet petit a* has no proper function because it only exists as it is perceived, with such perceptions being untranslatable from individual to individual. What does vary from individual to individual is the extent to which one accepts the impossibility of encountering said object. Although the no object can fill our fundamental lack, the drive glosses over this impossibility to a certain extent. Satisfaction is generated through repeated failure, but the use of the term ‘failure’ is contingent on the possibility of a successful outcome. The temporary objects associated with each iteration of desire are close enough to the subject’s concept of *objet petit a* that they can be imagined for a time to be the actual object. This is the basis of drive’s circular structure (fig. 1).

Objet petit a, by creating the void, also “introduces the possibility of filling it” (*Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 120). For Alenka Zupančič, our attempts to fill this void *are* sexuality. In her words, “[s]exuality is not something that exists *beyond* the symbolic; it “exists” solely as the contradiction of the symbolic space that appears because of the constitutively missing signifier, and of what appears in its place” (42). To be properly sexual at the concept level—to have a drive which functions as it should—a subject must,

to some degree, have an underlying belief *objet petit a* exists, that the void can be filled. An asexual subject, in these terms, would be someone who is certain that the void cannot be filled. In concrete terms, a subject in this position would reject the idea of intrinsic meaning and fail or refuse buy into a shared value system. Their thrust, if unimpaired, would function without an anchor in *objet petit a*. What this means is that, though they could go through the motions—working, socializing, (occasionally, as we will see) even having sex—they wouldn't subscribe to the ideology that leads so many people to believe that those activities can be truly fulfilling. These subjects, in common parlance, are nihilist.

Asexuality is often positioned as a nihilist approach to sexuality. In fact, presenting asexuality as a challenge to ideologies of compulsory sexuality accomplishes just such a positioning since those ideologies work center around the idea that sex is intrinsically meaningful or fulfilling. The idea of nihilistic approaches to sexuality extends to AVEN's message boards. Though some users are more tempered in their posts, a thread entitled "The meaning of sex?" features comments such as "Sex is meaningless" and "I view sex as a physical urge...[which some people] attach more meaning to." Though these posts can be considered asexually affirming, the term nihilism has been applied to asexuality in a broader and less positive sense as well. The thread "Asexuality of Nihilism," Silent Person writes, "for a young say with certainty that he/she is asexual strikes me, as someone with much experience inhabiting a young person's body, as naive in the extreme, arrogant (consciously or unwittingly), and ultimately nihilist." Most other users reacted negatively to this comment, with some indicating that the sentiment behind it was familiar. Recevium links Silent Person's posts

to previous experiences of older people telling them what they should do and care about and asserts that “it was wrong, and condescending, whenever someone put me in those categories.” The implication here is that they have experience with incorrect accusations that they are not caring about the things that should be important to them—accusations, that is, of nihilism.

A culture of compulsory sexuality seems to provide the basis for understanding asexuality as a form of nihilism, but such understandings are certainly supported by popular representations, specifically by the trope of the nihilist asexual. *The Stranger's* Mersault, Claude from *In the House*, and Bartleby the scrivener are a few popular examples. These characters—at least initially—function as members of society, but only because no more attractive option has presented itself. Though these characters often do not engage in sexual activity, it is worth addressing the instances in which they do. Mersault, for example, feels and acts upon a sexual attraction to a woman, Marie. But something is missing. When Marie asks Mersault if he loves her, he tells her “it [doesn't] mean anything but that [he doesn't] think so” (Camus 35). The lack of meaning associated with the sexual act calls into question whether his sexuality can be considered to be ‘human’ sexuality at the psychoanalytic level or if it can only be understood as secondary sexuality. Zupančič explains that human drives differ from animal instincts in that they “combine with different things, ideas, and objects [to yield] a satisfaction beyond need... what Lacan refers to as enjoyment (*jouissance*)” (88). In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan explains that this *jouissance* is defined by inaccessibility because it “appears not simply as the satisfaction of a need but as the satisfaction of a drive” (209). Even though these nihilist characters eat when they're hungry, have sex when

they're horny, get dressed, show up to school or work, there is no pursuit of *jouissance*. A combination of passivity and animal instinct guides these characters. There is no deeper meaning, no belief in love or fulfillment, attached to their pursuits. And abandoning said pursuits is as simple as saying, "I would prefer not to" (Melville 7).

The unnamed narrator of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, especially at the start of the novel, embodies the trope of the nihilist asexual. He lives alone in an apartment full of brand name furniture. He feels "trapped in [his] lovely nest," owned by "the things [he] used to own" (44). The idea behind putting this nest together was that the items were meant to make him feel "complete," "content," and "perfect" (46). But he feels trapped by these concepts as well. He doesn't just beg Tyler—a chaotic character whose arrival sets the narrative in motion—to "deliver [him] from Swedish furniture...[and] clever art," he begs Tyler to deliver him "from being perfect and complete" (46). The guiding sentiment here is that the living with the ideals of perfection and completion as they are put forth in the service of capitalism is unpleasant and—to continue Palahniuk's use of religious terminology—damning. Before meeting Tyler, it is only in support group for people with terminal illnesses that he can embrace the fact that "[his] life comes down to nothing" and feel himself able "to really relax and give up" (17, 18). He was grateful for the opportunity to lose all hope of having a fulfilling, brand name life because "losing all hope was freedom" (22). Material acquisitions and success bring him no pleasure, he attends college and gets a job because that's what his father tells him to do, and nowhere in the novel is there any mention of distinct plans for or fantasies about the future. He takes a nihilist approach to capitalism's promise of fulfillment through material acquisition.

This nihilism—to the point of repulsion—that the narrator of *Fight Club* feels for things that are meant to be fulfilling extends to the romantic and sexual as well. He first discussed sex in relation to Chloe, a dying woman who “looks like a skeleton dipped in yellow wax” and just wants “to get laid for the last time” before she dies (19, 20). The striking, unsexy absurdity of the situation positions sex as an unachievable, unnatural goal for the dying Chloe—an attachment to pleasure and fulfillment that she should have already abandoned. The narrator’s lack of interest in sex continues in his interactions with Marla Singer, a fellow support group attendee. She’s revealed to be attractive—described as having “black hair and pillowy French lips”—and their shared struggle leads the reader to expect some kind of relationship forming between them. But he expresses no interest in pursuing such a relationship. In fact, all he wants to do is get rid of her. At the first support group meeting that they attend together, he fantasizes about grabbing her and saying, “Marla, you big fake, you get out. This is the one real thing in my life, and you’re wrecking it” (24). When Marla starts dating Tyler, the narrator finds himself having to interact with her more and more frequently. His anger, disgust, and resentment about her closeness with Tyler come out on numerous occasions. In one instance, when he’s trying to kick her out of the house he shares with Tyler, “Marla lifts her skirt with her fingertips and sort of dances around him, her ass flying around inside her skirt” (67). There’s no discussion of arousal, no subjective descriptors used. All we get from the narrator is the line, “I just want her out of here” (67). But it’s not just Marla. The narrator rejects the idea that any romantic relationship could fill the void, could cure his ennui. When his father tells him to get married, he wonders “if another woman is really the answer [he needs]” (51).

Marla doesn't excite him because nothing excites him. We know he feels trapped in his life—his job, his stuff, the expectations people have for him—and we know the support group only appeal to him because pretending he's dying provides a temporary freedom. Similarly, his investment in the fight club he and Tyler start isn't an investment in the club itself or the ideology behind it; it's "about self-destruction," that is to say destruction of the socially-constructed self (52). The fighting doesn't lead to personal gain or add direction or meaning to the narrator's life, but it does provide a sense of liberation by rejecting the primacy that society places on those objectives. In his own words, "Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered" (53). When he finds himself threatening his boss and acting—to a certain extent—in defense of fight club, he realizes how little he cares about it. For him, turning that self-destructive aggression outward "is exhausting, and all of a sudden very, very boring" (99). Although participation in the fight club doesn't alter his nihilist outlook, the narrator's asexual nihilism is ultimately rehabilitated. He realizes that he has been Tyler all along. He realizes that he has been buying into—even propagating—a specific ideology, having sex, and attributing meaning to those sexual relationships. He realizes that "if Tyler loves Marla, [he, the narrator] love[s] Marla" (145).

Scholarship on *Fight Club* has largely dealt with the narrative's narrator and Tyler as a single, non-queer subject. This split subject frequently becomes representative of the position of the heterosexual white man in society during the time of the novel's publication. In an article ostensibly on the novel's film adaptation—but actually discussing scholarship on both the novel and the film—Claire Sisko King writes that "much scholarship situates *Fight Club* within the historical context of the late 1990s,

during which white masculinity claimed to be wounded and in crisis” (366). This discussion of masculinity has been chauvinistic at times, like in Kevin Boon’s argument that “Fight Club exposes what men in public discourse are no longer authorized to address: their sense of displacement within the rapidly changing milieu of contemporary American culture” (267). This argument villainizes contemporary culture for alienating heteronormative white men. At other times, *Fight Club* criticism frames the novel in opposition to these sentiments: “It is not that culture is not masculine but that the ideal of masculinity is an impossible burden to those who, for whatever reason, fail to conform” (375-76). Tyler, in Jordan’s article, represents “an epitome of masculinity” and the narrator’s ideal self (376). In either case, the criticism deals with the novel’s narrator not as a queer subject, but as a heteronormative male dealing with expectations of heteronormative masculinity. When queer readings of *Fight Club* are undertaken, homosexual themes are often pointed out in terms of images and representation. Suzanne Clark’s “‘Fight Club’: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence, and Sentimentality,” for example masculine identity suggests homosexual themes and relationships even though the narrative does not openly admit them” (417). Though there are queer forces underlying the novel in readings like this, the combined narrator/Tyler character generally not understood as queer himself. Understanding the narrator as queer in his nihilist asexuality, his rejection of the possibility of *objet a*, allows for queer readings that are only available if his asexuality is spared from rehabilitation.

The flip side of the nihilist asexual figure would be a subject defined by a certainty that *objet a* exists (a subject which I will argue also corresponds to a conception of asexuality). A properly functioning drive—when it is understood as a structure for the

exercise of desire—requires the repetition of failure. Lacan explains that repetition “is aimed at what is not there, *qua* represented” (*Desire and Its Interpretations* 63). Each of our pursuits attempts to capture the lost object through some placeholder object in the symbolic. Perhaps a fearful, willful ignorance is what leads us to pursue one job after another, one ideology after another, one relationship after another—hoping each time that this new object will fulfill us. Alenka Zupančič, in *What is Sex?* draws attention to Lacan’s insistence that *jouissance* can only exist “in and through repetition itself” (112). She accounts for this by using Deleuze’s idea that the things such repetition repeats is pure difference—rather than an actual object or original experience. Deleuze, in this ontology, is “positing repetition as an absolute beginning” (113). Zupančič is not simply rehashing the common reading of Lacan that repetition is a practice which keeps us bound to the symbolic order, she is arguing that repetition is the way in which we create the symbolic order.

All this is to say, the functioning of drive and desire, and the resulting maintenance of the symbolic order, are dependent on a repetition which isn’t acknowledged as such. Whether we’re repeatedly pursuing fulfillment through empty signifiers or repeating the process through which our pursuit of fulfillment generates signifiers, we need to believe on some level that each repetition is not simply a repetition. Although our previous attempts to reach *objet a* were failures, this new attempt is fundamentally different. We were mistaken in our previous signifier choices, but now we have truly found *objet a*. If we saw each repetition as nothing more than a repetition—as a pursuit doomed to failure—we wouldn’t be able to sustain the fantasies that undergird our desire-based drive.

This is the case even if we still subscribe to the fantasy of fulfillment. In fact, placing too much emphasis on the impossible object is what seems to prevent these problematic subjects from entertaining the possibility that any placeholder objects can fill the void and presents another trope of asexuality—the unimpressed asexual. This sort of character is be portrayed as waiting for their life (or the meaningful part of their life) to start—certain that none of the pursuits open to them in the symbolic have any bearing on that meaning. This generally presents as both a rejection of secondary-level sexual pursuits and a deprivileging of the concept-level sexuality of psychoanalytic desire. One example of this unimpressed asexual figure is Keith, from HBO’s *The Righteous Gemstones*, who leaves a tightknit group of Satanists that seems to hedonistically indulge in sex, metal, and expressive clothing choices to stay with Calvin—one of the show’s protagonists. He abandons his community and his old pursuits, but he doesn’t embrace Christianity, moral superiority, any new passions, or even his friendship with Calvin. He simply believes that Calvin is meant for great things—which he can never articulate—and that the best use of his time is to stay as close to Calvin as possible, assisting him when needed and waiting for that greatness to be revealed. Similarly, the narrative of *The Catcher in the Rye*’s Holden Caulfield is marked by the abandonment of pursuits—academic success, friendships, sexual experiences—with the justification that the objects of these pursuits (or the people who pursue them) are “phonies.” He gives no clear indication of what sort of object would qualify as “real,” but eventually seems to accept that it’s not something he can actively work towards. The misunderstood teen certain that things will be better in college, the true protestant who believes we are *only* saved through the grace of God, the beleaguered laborer who counts the days to retirement—all

refusing to fully engage with the world around them out of a certainty that nothing can measure up to the next stage of their life—all fit with this trope.

Perhaps the best example of the unimpressed asexual, though, is John Marcher of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle." This character, a gentleman of leisure living in London at the start of the twentieth century, is defined by "as the deepest thing within [himself], the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible," something that he could not bring about but only await (James 6). He can say with confidence that it hasn't come, that it's nothing he's experienced. He goes beyond that though, asserting that it's in no way comparable to anything he's experienced, that it's no material achievement or acquisition, nothing that he is "to achieve in the world, to be distinguished or admired for" (6). Not only that, but he's certain that it's not love. He's been in love, he tells May, and found it at times agreeable, delightful, and miserable. But he knows it's not what he's waiting for because "[i]t hasn't been overwhelming" and "[i]t wasn't strange" (7).

The meat of the story is his platonic relationship with May. At the end of their first dialogue, she tells Marcher, "I'll watch with you" (8). And for decades, that's what they do, they watch and wait. As they grow older, their platonic relationship deepens. They eat together, go to the opera, sit in the park, and talk without restraint. Marcher tells himself that he cannot marry May because "[h]is conviction, his apprehension, his obsession, in short, wasn't a privilege he could invite a woman to share" (10). The line itself is absurd because they are closer, emotionally, than many married couples and are both aware that this closeness has a basis in their *shared* obsession. We are told that "while they grew older together she did watch with him, and so she let this association

give shape and colour to her own existence” (12). She, just like Marcher came to be defined by the emphasis she placed on the impossible object. Being together with a focus on something external to them—as opposed to together with a focus on each other—seems to be the reason why marriage is never raised as a possibility, why their relationship remains asexual in practice.

The rehabilitation of Marcher’s asexuality—that is to say, the moment he stops being coded as asexual—comes tragically, in the wake of May’s death. Standing in front of her grave, comparing himself to another man, Marcher is struck by the horrible realization that “no passion had ever touched him, for [the other man’s raw grief and hunger] was what passion meant” (34). He thinks about May and realizes, “The escape would have been to love her; then, then he would have lived” (35). The escape from his endless waiting would have been to embrace achievable, articulable, familiar goals (like a romantic relationship) as temporary substitutes for the impossible object.

This asexual rehabilitation occurs not just ostensibly within the narrative’s plot but also in the writings of critics, who have tended to view the story as didactic. Maxwell Geiser, for example, imagines “The Beast in the Jungle” as a tragedy not simply limited to Marcher’s own failure but also an analogy for James’s own prioritization of abstract ideals over more visceral, human drives. He praises “how this completely autocentric writer...who saw the world only and absolutely in terms of his own standards and values, infantile, romantic, ‘literary’ and abstract as they were-could, in one leap here, move to an ‘alocentric’ or objective view of his own deepest and primary drives, his own true failure as a human being if not as a literary spokesman” (40). The use of terms, “autocentric” and “infantile,” which—in discussions of sex—would call asexuality to

mind, is more than simple coincidence. Geiser is reading Marcher's attachment to the abstract 'Beast' in favor of more immediate romantic connection as an allegory for James' own failure to be properly sexual. Eve Sedgwick, in a more progressive stance, still implies that Marcher was in a closet that he could and, for his own sake, should have come out of:

It is only through his coming out of the closet—whether as a *homosexual man* or as a man with a less exclusively defined sexuality that nevertheless admits of the possibility of desires for other men—that Marcher could even begin to perceive the attention of a woman as anything other than a terrifying demand or a devaluating complicity. (*Epistemology* 206–07)

Disparate as these readings are, both accuse Marcher of failing to desire—or understand desire—properly, and both indicate that a certain approach to desire would be proper. For Geiser, it is visceral, sexual, straight, desire. For Sedgwick, it is an open-minded desire that leans into the homosexual possibility.

Matthew Helmers, in "Possibly Queer Time," summarizes the arguments made by different critics, all of whom either encourage Marcher to go forward toward some specific future or take him as an example meant to warn others away from a similar fate. Each of these analyses take Marcher's failure—to understand, or act, or live—for granted and use their interpretation of the basis of that failure to present some kind of imperative, some moral to the story. "These imperatives expand into the type of knowledge Marcher should have, the model of time he should ascribe to, the sexuality he should embrace" (Helmers 102). A reading built around Marcher as an asexual subject would work with the understanding that Marcher is not a character in need of change, removing the

didactic imperative and allowing for a positive queer reading of his positioning before the end of the narrative.

Each of the five figures discussed in this chapter presents a culturally significant conception of asexuality. Accepting their asexualities as distinct forms of queer expression would challenge the assumption made by both writers and critics that a lack of perceived sexuality is an indicator of an underdeveloped character. It would also all those characters as the present pre-rehabilitation to help develop queer critical and theoretical discussions. Additionally, reading into the psychoanalytic framing of each character will necessarily raise the question of whether lack is really a term that can be used to define the umbrella of asexuality—since Esther Greenwood and Joy McNally seem to be thrust outliers on opposite sides, and the *Fight Club* narrator's relationship to *das Ding* is the reverse of John Marcher's. The final chapter will offer some potential queer theoretical uses for each of these figures and begin to explore the (perhaps impossible to answer) question of what it would mean for a “lack of sexuality” to not really be a lack.

CHAPTER 3: FINE HOW THEY ARE

3.1 Thrusting Differently

Accepting that each of these asexual figures provides a legitimate expression of queer potential would involve challenging the idea that their imposed rehabilitation makes them more real, full, or self-actualized. It would provide the opportunity both to challenge the assumptions made in the service of such rehabilitations and explore the queer theoretical potential of those asexual characters as they initially present.

In the case of *The Bell Jar* and *What Happens in Vegas*, challenging the assumptions made in service of those rehabilitations would involve a continuation of the argument, introduced at the end of 2.3, that neither Esther or Joy were actually successful in opting out of neoliberal productivity when their thrusts were adjusted. As we've discussed, a detail-oriented reading of the final scene of *The Bell Jar* shows Esther returning to college and implicitly looking forward to the focus on grades and socializing that the return would entail. A similar reading of *What Happens in Vegas* reveals Joy excited at the prospect of a large bank account and a successful husband. The disparity between this reading and its more empowering Rutiian alternative can be traced some of the potential issues with Ruti's theoretical approach. She emphasizes the difference "between the Other as a hegemonic collective social formation and the universe of intersubjective others," extrapolating a livable reality in which intersubjectivity could serve as the ultimate counterhegemonic act and continue even after the yoke of the Other has been cast off (43). This would mean that Esther and Joy could pursue articulable and satisfying goals and relationships outside of the purview of the symbolic order. But there is far from a consensus among psychoanalytic scholars about the viability of such an

approach. As Slavoj Žižek explains, “[One is] never merely a ‘small other’ (individual) interacting with other ‘small others’: the big Other must always be there” (9). More simply, “every act of communication symbolizes the fact of communication” (12).

This contrast is starkest in Ruti’s assertion that one’s connection to these intersubjective ties can be “robust enough to trump the warnings and cajolings of the social order, making it possible for us to desire in counterhegemonic ways” (77). For Ruti, desire can be conceptualized outside of the symbolic order—a true inner desire that one can embrace by refusing to “give a damn about what is (socially) expected of us” (45). We know, though, that social expectations/structure permeate all of our layers of internal self. For these intersubjective relationships, “every subject has to invent a fantasy of his or her own” (Žižek 48). But this doesn’t mean that internal desires or their structuring fantasies are the key to opting out of the symbolic order. As Lacan himself says, “man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (*Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 115). Ruti appears to be underestimating the expanse of the symbolic order. Desire can’t truly subvert/transgress this order because, “even when [one’s] desire is transgressive, this very transgression relies on what it transgresses” (Žižek 42).

Challenging the understanding that Esther’s and Joy’s rehabilitations allow them to truly opt out of neoliberal conceptions of success has the potential to do more than simply support a stricter Žižekian understanding of the symbolic order over a Rutian one. The challenge can also be extended to a critique of Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*. In that text, “the queer art of failure...quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for art, for love, and for being” (88). Mari Ruti criticizes Halberstam for fearlessly owning his failures to succeed in heteronormative capitalism without

acknowledging the fact that his education, tenure, whiteness, and American citizenship guarantee him a substantial degree of security and success within that system. She argues that those in more precarious positions would be far less likely to pursue failure in the name of radical politics, concluding that “Halberstam’s argument raises serious questions about who can afford to ‘opt out’ in the ways that he advocates” (36).

An understanding of Esther’s or Joy’s failures as radical or individuality-affirming runs into the same issues. Esther is ultimately able to surrender her fantasy of literary fame when she realizes that—as a smart, pretty woman with a college education—she will enjoy fulfilling pursuits and relationships, even if she does not yet know what those things will look like. Joy can give up her stressful career when she marries a handsome and financially comfortable man. Failure for both of these characters is cushioned by, and only really possible thanks to a certain level of, privilege within the neoliberal culture in which they are presented as failing. This serves as both a contestation of the impression one might get that there is anything significantly queer about the endings of these narratives and evidence against the radical potential of Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure*.

At the same time, taking Esther and Joy to be at their queerest when they still fit with conceptions of asexuality raises the possibility of new applications of radical queerness. Failure is arguably the most fundamental aspect of Esther’s pre-rehabilitation experience. But Halberstam’s statement, “Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood...[a]nd while failure certainly comes with a host of negative affects...it also provides opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life,” certainly does not seem to fit with her experience (3). Failing to write and speak and bathe is not wondrous for Esther; it’s terrifying. And

she is not provided the opportunities to poke holes in the expectations other people have for her because she is not in a privileged enough position to really remove herself from the expectations people have of her and not cogent enough to poke articulate holes. Her experience with failure is likely more common than Halberstam's. The practical exemplar of the queer art of failure, then, might not be someone who positions themselves as a child and sees life as a playground. It might be someone who is unable to position themselves as an adult (to the satisfaction of those around them) but is nevertheless held to adult standards of behavior, understanding, and productivity. Such an understanding is more sympathetic to the positioning of such queer figures and would allow readers to grasp how serious the consequences—Esther's suicide attempt, for an extreme example—of this positioning can be.

Reading Joy—when she is coded as an asexual career woman characterized by an excess of thrust—as queer sets us up to propose something akin to the inverse of Halberstam's theory: a queer art of success. One line, especially, already mentioned in our analysis of *What Happens in Vegas*, gives us some insight into what this new approach would entail. “It's like you're trying to come in first,” Jack tells Joy “but it's somebody else's race.” The symbolic order is always external to us, so we're always running in some Other's race, but this only becomes conspicuous when we're not keeping pace with those around us. The parties, profits, and status symbols that Joy experiences in such quick succession can't possibly be bringing her the satisfaction promised by heteronormative capitalism because she's taking less time to enjoy her big successes than her friends are to enjoy their small successes. The best way to approach the dominant ideology as someone who doesn't belong and to poke holes in its affects is to participate

so whole-heartedly in that ideology that your own endless cycle of thrust and frustration comes to represent (to those less invested or less success) that ideologies inevitable conclusion/payout.

3.2 Caring Differently

Accepting the narrator of *fight club* as a queer figure from the start connects us with an already existing, though marginal, use of asexuality in queer theoretical discourse. Ela Przybylo writes about the “nihilistic asexuality” of Valerie Solanas, an asexuality “borne of a frustration with the operations of privilege and wealth within a patriarchal context that left her disinherited, impoverished, isolated, and living precariously on the inconsistent alms of others” (*Asexual Erotics*, 51). Solanas argues that if women refused to have anything to do with men and acknowledged sex in general as “a gross waste of time,” they could bring about the elimination of male (that is patriarchal, capitalist) society and culture (Solanas 10). Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto* “serves to question the dominant patriarchal system, as well as feminist stories of optimism, hope, and social repair” (52). Although it doesn’t buy into the idea that any system of ideology or government is worth fighting for, this text argues that nothing is more important than fighting against the current system (and all those who consider it to be meaningful, correct, or even capable of improvement).

It may seem problematic to draw a connection between *Fight Club*—in which all but one of the main characters is presented a cisgender, heterosexual, white male—and *SCUM*, and it would be fair to say that many of Tyler’s disciples are angry at the system because they think that they should have been more successful within it. We already know, though, that the narrator’s frustration and self-destructive impulses are self-

directed. When Tyler escalates fight club into a terrorist group called Project Mayhem, the stated goal is “to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history” (110). Although the narrator occasionally parrots some of Tyler’s sayings, he doesn’t buy into this part of the philosophy—telling members of Project Mayhem to “play [their] little game” and leave him out of it (122). Reading him as queer character, an asexual nihilist figure, allows him to be understood as standing in opposition to the ideals of masculinity that Tyler embodies and promotes and presents a direct challenge to scholarly readings of fight club, like those mentioned in 2.4, which villainize contemporary culture for alienating heteronormative white men.

Reading “The Beast in the Jungle’s” John Marcher as a valid queer figure, whose asexuality can be conceptualized in terms of an excess of emphasis placed on *objet petit a*, allows for an anti-didactic reading such as the one undertaken by Matthew Helmers. Helmers makes a point of avoiding any speculation about the nature of the secret of the Beast but posits that predicting the secret would have been impossible for Marcher because Marcher exists in a sort of queer temporality, without a distinct past or future. In the narrative’s first scene, when Marcher is exploring historic Weatherend, he feels “so much poetry and history to press upon him that he [needs] some straying apart to feel in a proper relation with them” (James 1). History troubles him—it is not a natural part of his world. The idea that “in such a life as they all appeared to be leading for the moment one could not but take things as they came” is less a commentary on the attitudes of the leisure class than an expression of Marcher’s own temporality (2).

His coupling with May Bartram puts him in a position to accept her time. As Helmers writes, “Marcher’s commitment to Bartram leaves aside his queer time of lapses

and embraces a chronological time of known pasts” (Helmets 107). Before May comes into the story, there is no mention of the Beast. It exists for Marcher in the future, and without May—constructed by Marcher as “the knowledgeable subject who holds the key to understanding the past and future accurately”—it is impossible to watch and wait for this future event (107). Based on Helmets’s argument, it could be said that Marcher is a queer subject (in terms of temporality, not necessarily orientation) who enters into a heteronormative temporality through his relationship with May. The Beast is the future that he knows exists in this new temporality but is nevertheless unknowable to him, and terrifying in its unknowability, because he is a (temporally) queer subject. “The Beast in the Jungle,” could set the stage, then, for a theory of asexual temporality, which—just like the relationship between asexuality and sexuality—must be conceived as both a temporality and (due to its lack of external direction) a lack of temporality.

Additionally, accepting Marcher’s initial asexual positioning as that of a queer figure not self-ignorant or in need of rehabilitation allows his friendship with May to act as a challenge to the sexual imperative—a previously introduced term coined by Przybylo to refer to the ideology in which a subject who lives without sex is deficient, unhealthy, and incomplete. There are four facets to the sexual imperative. It “[privileges] sex above other activities, [conflates] sex and sexuality with the self, [codes] sex as acontextually ‘healthy’ and ‘good,’ and [emphasizes] sex as the glue of a romantic relationship” (228).

The first two facets can be clearly seen in Marcher’s final scene. Witnessing the romantic passion of another man—in a graveyard, presumably mourning the loss of a lover—he concludes that “no passion had ever touched him,” building that into the belief that he is “the man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened” (James 34). But he

did have a life and an identity. He has “his little office under Government,” and he “[cares] for his modest patrimony, for his library, for his garden in the country, for the people in London whose invitations he accepted and repaid” (James 12). To him, this is “a long act of dissimulation” because he believes he is meant for something greater (12). In reality, the regular performance of duties, hobbies, and acquaintanceships—though unlikely to frequently inspire passionate feeling—provide a great deal of the material for a person’s life and identity.

As for the third facet, the man that Marcher sees in the graveyard gives no indication of being happy or healthy. In fact, he is described as being in pain, as having an “injury not to be healed” (34). The absurd idea that this broken man, tied to a dead object, is somehow more fulfilled and more whole than Marcher perfectly reflects the coding of romantic passion as acontextually “healthy” and “good.” Most tragic is the fourth facet of the sexual imperative, the idea that his relationship with May is insubstantial because it is not held together by romantic passion. They go to galleries, to the opera, to restaurants. Often, they just sit and talk. They are together “long enough to have established a hundred small traditions,” one of which involves buying her trinket more expensive than he believes himself able to afford on her birthday (13).

They describe their relationship as covering their tracks, as a way of masking their difference from other people, as “answer[ing] so completely to so usual an appearance” (11). But they know each other intimately (though not physically so), they can talk easily for hours—for decades—and they care deeply about each other. In the final days of May’s life, Marcher comes to terms with just how much he cares: “She was dying and he would lose her; she was dying and his life would end” (25). And May,

though she humors Marcher when he talks about their relationship as a cover for their inability to relate to other people, cares about him and takes the relationship seriously. “If you’ve had your woman I’ve had,” she says, “my man” (17).

3.3 Sublimating Differently

Finally, understanding that a figure like Jughead—characterized by the trope of the sublimated asexual—is a valid and full expression of queer sexuality on his own provides a challenge to the continued use of Freud’s conception of sublimation. If Jughead’s attachment to eating is no less authentic or deeply revealing than someone else’s attachment to sex, we find ourselves within a framework similar to the one propounded by Przybylo in the introduction to *Asexual Erotics* in which “sublimation...is not the sublimation of sexual desires or drives into other pursuits, but the transference of the erotic into various activities, sex included” (22). This erotic, established by Audrey Lorde in her 1978 essay, “Uses of the Erotic,” deprivileges sex—or the “superficially erotic”—as a primary source of knowledge, joy, or intimacy. In Lorde’s conception of the erotic, these feelings and energies are just as accessible through activities such as “dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea” (Lorde 57). Jughead’s use of language usually limited to the superficially erotic in discussions of eating, then, serves to promote a transition to the idea of the erotic as employed by Lorde and forwarded by Przybylo.

This model can easily be extended to modern adaptations of characters whose original stories provided the potential for asexual readings. These adaptations could be more probing and mature—exploring dark themes, employing adult language,

acknowledging the existence of sexuality—without assigning allosexual orientations to the characters.

Asexuality, when it is understood only in terms of lack, may not have the theoretical potential of other queer sexualities. But, as this paper has hopefully shown, a disparate collection of relations to sexual attraction and psychoanalytic positioning are brought together under the umbrella of asexuality. Though the term is fairly new as an identity category, it seems to be long predated by the idea that sexuality is something that can be lacking. Saying that we can use a term (like asexuality) to refer to a lack of sexual attraction is equivalent to saying sexual attraction is something which can be lacking. This means that the concept of asexuality as lack (even if the term asexuality isn't used) is necessary for the idea that sexual attraction is something which one can have more or less of. If some people are less sexual, others must be more sexual. The idea that sexuality is quantifiable (if only abstractly) in this way is a difficult one to challenge because the belief that some people or types of relationships are intrinsically sexual does an immense amount of cultural work—for traditional gender dynamics, colonialism, age relations, etc.—that one might have no idea where or how to begin. But when working within a nascent field, isn't that how it usually goes?

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