

What the Heart Wants

How Representation in Media Impacts Asexual Individuals

[SAWYER KUZMA]

“I’m not gay... but I don’t think I’m straight either. I don’t know what I am. I think I might be nothing.” This dialogue comes from the episode “That Went Well” of *Bojack Horseman*, between an asexual main character and his love interest who, as it turns out, is not much of a love interest after all. Characters coming out as asexual is uncommon in Western media today, and asexuality has a fraction of the representation that other sexual minorities have due to social stigmas that surround the orientation.¹ Asexuality, a lack of sexual attraction in an individual, is a sexual orientation that was relatively unknown by western society until the past twenty years, when online forums allowed the identity to receive more social exposure.² Asexuality is largely unrecognized in modern western media and when it is portrayed, it is often in a negative light. While some may argue that asexuality is simply a form of inaction and does not require any special consideration, asexual representation is crucial in increasing the public’s knowledge of the sexuality, disproving harmful stereotypes, and supporting asexual-identifying individuals. This essay will analyze societal views of asexuality, how asexuality is viewed in the media, and how these views and representations impact asexual individuals.

Asexual is just one label belonging to a family of similar identities including aromantic, graysexual, demisexual, allosexual, and others. The terms relevant to this research are asexuality, a lack of sexual attraction to other people; aromanticism, a lack of romantic attraction to other people; and allosexuality, sexual attraction to

1 Ellen Carter, “Asexual Romance in an Allosexual World: How Ace-Spectrum Characters (and Authors) Create Space for Romantic Love.” *Journal of Popular Romance Stories* 9 (2020): 1-19. www.jprstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ARIAAW.08.2020.pdf.

2 Ana Catarina Carvalho and David L. Rodrigues, “Sexuality, Sexual Behavior, and Relationships of Asexual Individuals: Differences Between Aromantic and Romantic Orientation.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 51, no. 4 (2022): 2159–2168, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02187-2>.

other people (this includes heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, etc.). While asexuality exists on a wide spectrum encompassing many identities, it is not well known in the public sphere. According to a national poll analyzed by Carvalho, “53% of British adults were confident they could define asexuality, but 75% were unable to explain what asexuality is.”³ While this study only covered Britain, the fact that many adults do not know how to define asexuality is not limited to the nation.

There are many reasons why asexuality may be an obscure identity, but heteronormativity is the main culprit. Heteronormativity promotes heterosexual monogamous relationships that produce children. As asexual and aromantic individuals often do not fall into this type of relationship, they defy the societal norms forced upon them. Essentially, as Carvalho quotes from Chasin 2015, “Society tends to value romantic above non-romantic relationships and considers sexual behaviors as a fundamental aspect of those relationships.”⁴ The consequence of this value in media is a lack of asexual and aromantic characters appearing to the public, creating the lack of awareness surrounding the identity seen today.

When asexuality does appear in media, its representation can be lacking, as seen in “Better Half,” an episode of *House* that aired in 2012. In this episode, an asexual woman tells her doctor that she and her husband are both asexual, saying “We kiss and cuddle, but neither one of us is interested in sex.”⁵ As the episode progresses, multiple doctors provide their theories on the cause of their patients’ asexuality, including unbalanced hormone levels, spinal injury, and childhood trauma. Dr. House, determined to find a reason as to why a couple would not desire sex—as he believes “[sex is] the fundamental drive of our species,”⁶—brings the woman’s husband into the hospital to take blood samples from him. At the end of the episode, House reveals that the man’s asexuality has been caused by a brain tumor that has gone unnoticed in his brain for over a decade. After learning of her husband’s tumor, the woman reveals that she faked her asexuality to please her husband. This episode emphasizes the societal view that asexual people have something wrong with them that needs to be fixed in order for them to be “normal”. House normalizes the idea that people should question asexual people’s sexuality and ask them if something is wrong. This builds disbelief and stigma around the orientation that can lead to great harm to asexual individuals.

Another recent example of asexual representation in western media appears in *Bojack Horseman*, which aired on Netflix from 2014 to 2020. In this television series, Todd Chavez, a recurring character who appears throughout all six of the

3 Carvalho, *Sexuality, Sexual Behavior, and Relationships of Asexual Individuals: Differences Between Aromantic and Romantic Orientation*, 2159.

4 Carvalho, 2166.

5 *House*, season 8, episode 9, “Better Half,” directed by Greg Yaitanes, written by David Shore and Kath Lingenfelter, aired January 23, 2012, NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2012.

6 Yaitanes, “Better Half.”

show's seasons, is revealed to be asexual in the season three finale of the show.⁷ In subsequent episodes, Todd is shown exploring his identity and finding other asexual people to form a community. This example is a much more accurate representation of asexuality in media than that shown in *House*, as Todd's asexuality is not mocked or questioned by the narrative but rather is treated earnestly and with respect. Todd finds multiple partners and meets many different types of asexual people throughout the show, a significant shift from the asexual representation shown in *House* which only depicted two asexual characters, one of which was later revealed to not be asexual at all.⁸ *Bojack Horseman* shows the audience how diverse asexuality can be, and in doing so, challenges the idea that heterosexuality is necessary for one to be happy.

One final example of how asexuality is portrayed—or rather, not portrayed—in the media can be seen in *Riverdale*, a television show adapted from the Archie comics. Among its cast of characters is Jughead Jones, who was first introduced as a character in the Archie comic series in 1941. Since his creation, Jughead has become one of the most prominent asexual characters in western media and acts as a symbol of the asexual community for many—this can be seen in *Bojack Horseman* where Todd Chavez has a tattoo dedicated to Jughead as an allusion to his asexuality.⁹ Throughout the comic series, Jughead is defined by his love for food and repulsion for women. These traits continued into the new Archie comics released beginning in 2014. In *Jughead No. 4*, a spin-off of the new Archie comics, Jughead was finally announced to be explicitly asexual and aromantic.¹⁰ Although this was a welcome confirmation of what many fans had already suspected,¹¹ just a few years later Jughead's canonic sexuality changed once again. In 2017, *Riverdale* was released on the CW and featured the Archie comic characters as teenagers surrounded by mystery and murder. Shortly into the first season, Jughead was revealed to be attracted to women when he entered a sexual relationship with fellow character Betty Cooper.¹² This shift in Jughead's portrayal may seem trivial to some, but has deeper implications. In a culture that prefers heterosexual relationships over others, an asexual character being made heterosexual reveals the belief that romance and sex are inherent parts of life that are necessary for a character to be seen as compelling.

The replacement of asexuality with supposedly more compelling sexual relationships is a problem seen in many forms of media. The root of this lack of representation rests in heteronormativity, as well as in the belief that asexual

7 *Bojack Horseman*, season 3, episode 12, "That Went Well," directed by Amy Winfrey, written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, aired July 22, 2016, Tornante Television and Netflix, 2020.

8 Bob-Waksberg, *Bojack Horseman*.

9 Bob-Waksberg.

10 Chip Zdarsky and Erica Henderson, "Jughead #4," *Jughead* (Archie, 2016).

11 Abraham Riesman, "Archie Comic Reveals Jughead Is Asexual," *Vulture*, 8 Feb. 2016.

12 *Riverdale*, season 1, episode 6, "Chapter Six: Faster, Pussycats! Kill! Kill!" directed by Lee Toland Krieger, written by Tessa Leigh Williams and Nicholas Zwart, Archie Comics and Warner Bros. Television Studios, 2022.

individuals have something “wrong” with them. Sex is used in media, as Vares quotes, to signify how people can find happiness: “Happy objects, like the happy family, become ‘happiness pointers’ or a means to happiness – if we follow their lead we will be able to find happiness.”¹³ This heteronormative portrayal of sex as essential for a satisfying life feeds into stereotypes about asexual individuals that can have real-life impacts. The few characters who are represented as not having sexual attraction are often portrayed as villains, lacking humanity and “broken” as to show how abnormal they are.¹⁴ In the same vein, characters who lack attraction are often not explicitly named as asexual, leading to a further lack of awareness about the identity among audiences. All of these factors contribute to negative beliefs toward asexual people.

Although one could argue that media representation does not have a real-world impact on asexual individuals, the portrayal of this identity in media has the ability to build up preexisting biases against asexual individuals that can lead to emotional damage, social exclusion, and even corrective rape. In a study of fifteen asexual-identifying individuals in New Zealand, Vares found that all of them had negative experiences related to others’ perceptions of their identity.¹⁵ One participant described feeling sadness at missing out on the “core experience” of getting married, despite his lack of desire for this type of relationship.¹⁶ Even more common within the group was the experience of wondering what was “wrong” with them when they did not experience sexual attraction.¹⁷ As Vares found, many asexual-identifying individuals do not feel shame about their singleness itself, but rather at other people’s perception of their singleness, showing the importance of spreading awareness and acceptance to reduce this stigma. While Vares’ research comes from a small sample, this sample is made up of a pool of individuals who only make up about 1% of the human population,¹⁸ making it difficult to conduct an in-depth study involving many respondents.

Alongside the negative emotional impact that heteronormativity has on asexual individuals, a study found that asexuals were “evaluated more negatively, viewed as less human, and less valued as contact partners, relative to heterosexuals and [homosexuals and bisexuals].”¹⁹ This shows how social exclusion can come from inaccurate media representation. Additionally, corrective rape threatens the safety of asexual individuals and is caused by anger directed at their identities, which can lead to a fear of expressing one’s identity in public. As Doan-Mihn writes, corrective

13 Ahmed 2010: 26 qtd. in Vares, “Asexuals Negotiate the ‘onslaught of the Heteronormative.’”

14 Patricia Kennon, “Asexuality and the Potential of Young Adult Literature for Disrupting Allonormativity,” *The International Journal of Young Adult Literature* 2, no. 1, (2021) 1-24, <https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.24877/IJYAL.41>.

15 Vares, “Asexuals Negotiate the ‘onslaught of the Heteronormative.’”

16 Vares.

17 Vares.

18 Aicken et al. 2013: 125 qtd. in Carter, “Asexual Romance in an Allosexual World: How Ace-Spectrum Characters (and Authors) Create Space for Romantic Love,”

19 MacInnis 2012: 725 qtd. in Carter.

rape is an act of punishing an individual for straying from the heterosexual norm of society and a way to force them back into conformity.²⁰ Although asexual identities are defined by a lack of attraction, they are still at risk of corrective rape, and rapists often argue that they assaulted their victims in order to “fix” them and that it was for the victim’s “own good.”²¹ This defense of rape reveals how media can impact the real world. Asexual representation, such as in *House*, can create disbelief in asexuality and perpetrate the idea that asexual individuals must have something wrong with them that causes them to not experience attraction. As Kennon describes, the view of asexuals as robotic and lacking humanity is prevalent in western media and dehumanizes asexual individuals to the point where corrective rape is seen as a mercy to them.²² The impact of asexual representation is very real and has the ability to shape societal views into dangerous misconceptions that threaten the safety of asexual individuals.

Asexual representation, while infrequent in modern western media, can have significant impacts on social beliefs and norms. When asexuality is represented in a way that values the emotions and experiences of asexual individuals – such as the examples found in *Bojack Horseman* and *Jughead* – awareness and education can spread to disprove stereotypes and promote acceptance of those who exist outside of heteronormativity. However, many examples of asexual representation – such as that in *House* – reaffirm stereotypes about asexuality that can lead to harm against asexual individuals including exclusion, feelings of being “broken”, and sexual assault. Asexual representation, when done in a manner that considers the full emotions of asexual-identifying individuals, has the power to change societal beliefs about asexuality and break the standard of heteronormativity. By exposing audiences to characters who live full and satisfying lives without the presence of romance or sex in their relationships, the media can rewrite the heteronormative narrative that has persisted in Western media for centuries.

20 Sarah Doan-Minh, “Corrective Rape: An Extreme Manifestation of Discrimination and the State’s Complicity in Sexual Violence.” *Hastings Women’s Law Journal* 30, no. 1, (2019) 167-196, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/haswo30&i=197>.

21 Doan-Minh, “Corrective Rape: An Extreme Manifestation of Discrimination and the State’s Complicity in Sexual Violence,”

22 Kennon, “Asexuality and the Potential of Young Adult Literature for Disrupting Allonormativity,”