

Asexuality in American Popular Culture

Asexuality is a sexual identity of people who do not experience sexual attraction. It became and object of popular interest at the beginning of the 21st century, when asexual people have begun to find each other online, discuss their identity, and share problems they were facing. Over the last five years some examples of asexual characters and tropes have begun to appear, from television to comics and novels. The aim of this project is to analyze the representation of asexuality in American popular culture. I do this for two reasons: to explore how asexuality is constructed, but also to find out what asexual perspective can tell us about how sexuality is understood in the Western cultures and what norms shape it.

My analysis will focus on four case studies:

1. non(re)productive asexuality in the animated show *BoJack Horseman*,
2. asocial, asexual male geniuses in television shows (Sherlock Holmes in BBC's *Sherlock* and Sheldon Cooper in CBS's *The Big Bang Theory*),
3. asexual yet romantically-inclined women in popular young adult novels, (e.g. *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* by Kathryn Ormsbee [2017], *Sawkill Girls* by Claire Legrand [2018]),
4. asexuality and genderlessness in science fiction texts (e.g. Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* [1969], Samuel Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah" [1967], Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* trilogy [2013-15], Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* [2017]).

They will be supplemented by an analysis of the reviews of the representation of asexuality produced by the asexual community. A study of asexuality in popular culture requires a variety of theoretical approaches and an intersectional perspective; that is, it needs to be explored along with such key identity categories as gender, race, and disability. I will employ methods and perspectives of cultural studies, discourse analysis and reception and fan studies, as well as gender, queer, and disability studies.

Research on asexuality not only sheds light on this under-researched sexuality, but also offers an opportunity for creating an asexual critical lens, a perspective that reveals the workings of normative systems of compulsory sexuality, that is the assumption and expectation that everyone is and should be sexual, and amatonormativity, or the privileging of romantic love and relationships. This in turn results in a critical reflection about the assumption that sexuality and romantic love occupy a central place in human life, an approach that marginalizes those who lead non-sexual or non-romantic lives.

My project contributes to asexuality studies by exploring recent developments in the representation of asexuality that have not yet been a topic of extensive academic research and by combining the analysis of mainstream depictions of asexuality in culture and the community's reception of this representation. Even though the awareness of asexuality is steadily rising in Poland, asexuality studies as an academic perspective is quite new. My project contributes to the development of this field globally but also aims to introduce asexuality in Polish academia through conference presentations and publications. My intersectional approach makes this project a significant contribution not only to asexuality studies, but also to queer studies, gender studies, and disability studies.

Results of the project will include a manuscript of a monograph in English and two articles in a top-tier journal, as well as presentations at conferences in the USA and in Poland.