"This Work Is Tagged 'Asexual Character'": An Analysis of Asexuality in Fanfiction

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Abstract

Although asexual activism and asexuality scholars show that asexuality encompasses a wide range of experiences, asexual people remain an understudied sexual minority. Pop-cultural representations of asexuality are uncommon, but one place where asexual people are often represented is in fanfiction: transformative stories written by fans of cultural works. This thesis studies asexual depictions of two characters: the unsociable genius Sherlock Holmes (BBC) and the playboy superhero Tony Stark (Marvel Studios). Using content and discourse analysis to study a sample of 100 stories, this thesis shows that while asexual stories are diverse, they contain a number of recurring tropes and storylines. They depict asexuality as a cause for both negative and positive emotions and portray asexual characters as active participants in romantic relationships and sometimes in sex. This thesis shows that fanfiction can play a key role in providing representation of marginalized sexualities and furthering our understanding of asexual perspectives.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the advent of asexual activism and the scholarly field of asexuality

studies have brought increasing recognition for asexual people: those who experience no sexual

attraction and/or desire for sexual interaction with other people. However, asexual people remain

an understudied sexual minority. Although some studies have begun to examine asexual

experiences through interviews (e.g. see Gupta, 2017; MacInnis & Hodson, 2012), asexuality

remains particularly understudied in terms of its depiction in pop culture. This is unsurprising, as

openly-asexual characters in TV shows, books, and movies remain rare. Nevertheless, in one

area, depictions of asexual characters occur with more frequency: the online world of fanfiction.

In online fandoms, on forums, social media and other social sites, fans of TV shows,

movies, books and so forth come together. They discuss what they hate and love about the texts

they admire, and they frequently turn this admiration into production through the creation of

"fanworks", such as videos ("fanvids"), visual art ("fanart") and written stories ("fanfiction").

This online culture has formed a unique environment in which people learn and exchange ideas

and information about marginalized sexualities. In fanfiction, depicting a beloved character as a

sexual minority is more the norm than the exception, and although gay romance is the most

common iteration of this, asexuality has also become a recurring topic in recent years. In this

thesis, I study the fan depictions of asexuality in two characters from popular media with very

different outlooks on sex and sexuality: superhero Tony Stark (also known as Iron Man) and

detective Sherlock Holmes. Using content analysis and discourse analysis, I outline the definition

of asexuality in fanfiction, its emotional valence, and its influence on asexual characters'

romantic and sexual lives. I approach this work as both a fan and an asexual person; positions

that I describe in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 when I discuss the theoretical underpinnings of my work. Studying asexuality in fanfiction will provide an important new perspective both on this understudied sexual minority, and on the role of fandom in creating transformative work that highlights the experiences of characters that belong to minority groups. In this introduction, I provide an overview of the structure of this thesis. Before I do this, however, I introduce the two characters whose fandom depictions are central to this work.

Tony Stark, "Iron Man"

Tony Stark's Personality

The character Tony Stark first appeared in the comic book *Tales of Suspense* in 1963 (Lee, 1963), and first had a solo comic book, *Iron Man #1*, in 1968 (Friedrich, 1968). In 2008, Marvel Studios released the first *Iron Man* film (Favreau, 2008), which doubled as the launch of its *Marvel Cinematic Universe,* a series of superhero films with overlapping storylines and characters. Although the films borrow from the Marvel comic books, including those featuring Tony Stark, some plot diversions and differences in character backstory are apparent. In describing Tony Stark, I rely chiefly on his cinematic appearances, as these are used far more prominently as source material for fanfiction – of over 148,000 works tagged 'Tony Stark' on the fanfiction website archiveofourown.org, 99.2 per cent indicated that they are based on the movies rather than the comic books.

Tony Stark is an American business magnate, inventor, billionaire and public figure (Favreau, 2008). His father was an inventor and weapons specialist who built a major weapons manufacturing company in the United States. Tony inherited this company after his parents both died in a car crash. In the plot of the first Iron Man film, Tony is kidnapped by terrorists in

Afghanistan (Favreau, 2008). In the process of his escape, he invents an armored suit powered by a small nuclear reactor on his chest. By controlling the suit from inside with powerful software, Tony is able to fight and destroy terrorists, criminals, and monsters. He continues to improve the suit and use it to act as a vigilante and superhero, thus becoming Iron Man.

Tony Stark is shown to be self-assured and arrogant. He is also extremely intelligent. Throughout the movie series, he frequently invents his way out of problems, and often lectures other characters on technological issues. He is stubborn and resents being told what to do, a characteristic often apparent in his interactions with fellow superhero Steve Rogers (Captain America). Throughout the *Iron Man* movies, Tony faces a variety of traumatic circumstances, including his kidnapping, an apparently terminal illness (later reversed through another invention), and a variety of other life-and-death situations. As a result, Tony exhibits symptoms of stress, anxiety, and PTSD, and is often shown to respond to such symptoms through self-destructive behaviours, such as heavy drinking, seeking out dangerous situations, and distancing himself from friends.

Tony has and develops a number of close relationships, such as with his assistant-turned-girlfriend Pepper Potts and his friend James Rhodes. He also bonds with several children and teenagers throughout his movie appearances, including younger superhero Peter Parker (Spider-Man). After Tony's heroic death in *Avengers: Endgame*, many superheroes and friends attend his funeral.

Tony Stark's Sex Life

In the opening scene of *Iron Man* (Favreau, 2008), Tony Stark is travelling in a truck with three soldiers; when he finds out one of them is a woman, he tells her she has "excellent

bone structure" and he can not look away now that he knows she is a woman. One of the other soldiers then asks him if it is true that he has gone "12 for 12 with last year's Maxim cover models", i.e., that he has slept with all of them. Tony answers that it's a "trick question" because there is one model he did not sleep with, but "the Christmas cover was twins", meaning he did sleep with twelve models. Tony describes himself as a "playboy" in *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012), and he is shown to have an active and varied sex life. He frequently surrounds himself with young, attractive women. For instance, in *Iron Man 2* (Favreau, 2010), Tony holds a birthday party; most of the attendees are young women who are fawning over Tony. He also sexually pursues people who work for him, such as younger female assistants. When this happens, his friend and employee Pepper says, "I'm sorry, he's very eccentric" (Favreau, 2010), implying that this behavior is common. Tony also frequently comments on women's bodies, such as the soldier in the scene referenced above, and otherwise objectifies them, saying "I want one" when he spots a good-looking and impressive woman (Favreau, 2010). Thus, Tony is a womanizer, a playboy, and depicted to have a very active heterosexual sex life.

Sherlock Holmes in 21st Century London

Sherlock Holmes' Personality

Similar to Tony Stark, Sherlock Holmes' character in the cultural text of interest is an adaptation. While Tony Stark was initially a comic book hero, Sherlock Holmes is the iconic character from the detective stories written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle between 1887 and 1927 (Doyle, 1887). With his friend Dr Watson, Sherlock Holmes solves crimes in London, using his deductive reasoning abilities to extract meaning from clues other people deem irrelevant. As with Tony Stark, however, Sherlock Holmes' presence in fanwriting circles is mostly driven by his

appearance in adaptations. On archiveofourown.org, less than 5 per cent of stories about Sherlock Holmes indicate that they are based on the original version set in 19ᵗʰ century London. Instead, most fanfic is based on the popular BBC series *Sherlock*. The series aired four seasons between 2010 and 2017 (Gatiss & Moffat, 2010), with each season consisting of three episodes. In *Sherlock*, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are citizens of modern-day London. Sherlock is an ex-drug addict, lives at 221B Baker Street, and works as a "consulting detective". This means he solves crimes for private clients and occasionally assists inspectors at Scotland Yard in homicide cases. In each episode of the series, one case forms the central basis of the plot, with interpersonal conflicts and larger criminal mysteries providing plotlines that run through multiple episodes.

Sherlock in this adaptation is revealed to be extremely intelligent, as well as very self-assured about his intelligence. In the first episode of the series, his first action is to acquire the phone numbers of journalists and send them texts that contain only the word "wrong!" while an inspector gives a press conference about a case. When he meets John, he immediately deduces that John is a veteran who is looking for a housemate. Thus, it is shown quickly that he outwits others and spots clues that others overlook (Gatiss & Moffat, 2010).

Another core aspect of Sherlock's character is his inability to get along with others, due to his cold and unsociable manner. For instance, he regularly ridicules people around him for not being able to make his deductions or for otherwise not being smart. He also tends to be openly pleased about homicides, because they provide him with a puzzle. In addition, he refuses to engage in any social niceties, provide other people with emotional support, or otherwise form reciprocal relationships. Sherlock therefore has no friends until he meets John Watson, and he is hated by multiple police officers he works with, who call him "freak". When John Watson shows

he's impressed with Sherlock's deductive reasoning, Sherlock says people usually tell him to "piss off" instead (Gatiss & Moffat, 2010). Sherlock refers to these interpersonal issues by calling himself a "high-functioning sociopath" (Gatiss & Moffat, 2010). Despite this, he eventually develops a strong friendship with John, and on the occasions when John is in danger, he experiences deep distress.

Sherlock's Lack of a Sex Life

In contrast with Tony Stark, Sherlock Holmes's depiction in *Sherlock* shows him to have very little interest in relationships and sex. In an early scene, a woman Sherlock knows nervously asks him whether he'd like to have coffee, and he responds, "Black, two sugars, please," (Gatiss & Moffat, 2010), setting his character up as oblivious to other people's romantic concerns. Later, Sherlock assures John that girlfriends are "not [his] area" and he is "married to [his] work" (Gatiss & Moffat, 2010).

This has led to public speculation that the show's creators may have intended for Sherlock to be read as gay—particularly because many other characters assume he and John are dating—or even for him to be read as asexual. However, Steven Moffat, one of the show's two frontrunners, said in interviews that "there's no indication in the original stories that he was asexual or gay", and that Sherlock's choice to abstain from relationship in the 2010 BBC series is "the choice of a monk, not the choice of an asexual. If he was asexual, there would be no tension in that, no fun in that—it's someone who abstains who's interesting." (Jeffries, 2012). The actor Benedict Cumberbatch, who plays Sherlock, said in an interview with *Vulture* in 2014: "[Sherlock is] asexual. He doesn't want any, and it's very purposeful on his part. […] [H]e can't beat female intuition, […] love is too big a risk for him. That doesn't make him gay, and it

doesn't make him asexual. It means he's purposely abstaining for the sake of his craft." (Yuan, 2014). Thus, although Cumberbatch is ambiguous about whether the word "asexual" describes Sherlock, Moffat and he agree that Sherlock does not lack desire, but instead chooses not to act on this desire.

This to some extent is borne out in Sherlock's interactions with the character Irene Adler in the *Sherlock* episode *A Scandal in Belgravia*. (McGuigan, 2012). Adler is a professional dominatrix in possession of damaging photographs of a famous individual, which Sherlock is tasked to retrieve. She attempts to seduce Sherlock, unexpectedly showing up entirely naked for their conversation and flirting with Sherlock. He is flummoxed by this, losing his train of thought multiple times due to this distraction. Later, when it seems Adler has been killed, Sherlock falls into bad habits and becomes obsessed with cracking a code she left him. John and others assume he was in love with Adler (McGuigan, 2012).

Thus, Sherlock lives a chiefly celibate life and frequently indicates he is uninterested in relationships. However, he does show an interest in at least one woman, and the creators and actors interpret him as abstinent or celibate by choice, rather than due to a lack of interest because of asexuality.

Contents of This Thesis

In Chapter 1, I examine the theoretical background for studying asexuality. I trace the emergence of asexuality as a contemporary concept through genealogical methods. I follow notions of asexuality from Freudian understandings of sexual instincts and frigidity, through psychiatric understandings of "sexual dysfunction" in the second half of the twentieth century, finally arriving at modern activists' understandings of their own asexuality and the research of

contemporary psychologists and sexologists. These contemporary understandings of asexuality by psychologists and asexual activists are contrasted with emerging insights from the new field of asexuality studies. I use insights from asexuality studies to outline my own position as an asexual scholar. I also show how asexuality studies highlights questions such as: Is asexuality a sexual orientation? Is asexuality queer, and what are the implications of its potential queerness/non-queerness? What insights does asexuality offer when it comes to studying societal views on sex and sexuality?

Then, in Chapter 2, I describe the history of fandom studies and fanfiction studies in particular. I begin by constructing a definition of fanfiction, examining multiple characteristics of fanfiction that have been identified by fandom scholars. I then discuss the history of studying fanfiction, which began in the 1960s and 1970s when science fiction shows inspired the formation of the first large cult fan communities as we know them today. In contemporary fanfiction studies, multiple approaches can be taken to study fanfiction, depending on the goals of the study. Two of these methods are important for my work: a literary approach and a sociopolitical approach. I discuss each of these approaches and their relevance for this project. Lastly, I discuss my own position as a scholar-fan.

In Chapter 3, I outline the methodological approaches I take in this thesis. This begins with a description of the procedures used to gather my sample of 100 fanfiction stories for analysis. Subsequently, I outline the methods of analysis I use. Content analysis can encompass a variety of approaches; I discuss the ways this form of analysis is used in my work. Discourse analysis can likewise refer to an array of (somewhat) related methods. Foucauldian discourse analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis both have an influence on the discourse analysis I pursue, as shown in this chapter.

The first results chapter, Chapter 4, approaches the sample of fanfiction through a content analysis. In this chapter, I provide a general description of the sample of 100 stories. I also develop a categorization system to identify six common story types that occur within the sample. Using this categorization system, I begin to identify differences between the depiction of Tony Stark and Sherlock Holmes as asexual characters. These contrasts are linked to differences in the canonical portrayals of the two characters. Lastly, I identify and describe several themes that are common across story types: the pathologization of asexuality through viewing it as "brokenness" or "freakiness", and the presence of sex-positive, sex-neutral and sex-negative attitudes among asexual characters.

In Chapter 5, I use discourse analysis of the full sample and a close reading of one story to examine how the sample of fanfiction defines (and does not define) asexuality. In this context, stories of the *Informative* type identified in Chapter 4 are particularly important; however, fics of any story type can contain discursive statements that help to define asexuality. I identify and discuss the implications of the most common definition: "a lack of sexual attraction". However, this definition is not the only one that is present in the sample, which leads to a complex picture of what asexuality is or can be, and what it rarely is or never can be. In particular, I focus on how asexuality is contrasted from aromanticism. Then, I place these definitions in the contexts created by the background in Chapter 1. How do the definitions in fanfiction fit into other contemporary understandings of asexuality? What are the implications that these definitions offer?

I subsequently describe the different emotional valences of asexuality in Chapter 6. This chapter focuses on the circumstances in which asexuality produces negative emotions such as fear and shame, or positive emotions such as joy and relief. Strong emotions surrounding

asexuality are most common in stories of the *Realization/Coming Out* type identified in Chapter 4. Through discourse analysis and close readings of two stories of this type, I outline common patterns of emotions surrounding asexuality: asexuality is generally associated with negative emotions when it is unrecognized or hidden (closeted), but associated with positive emotions when it is recognized by the asexual person or accepted by others (after a coming-out). I examine the implications of this pattern, such as the importance of education about asexuality.

In Chapter 7, the focus lies on asexual characters in relationships. Stories that focus on relationships are identified as some of the most common in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I discuss how asexuality is often presented as a problem that must be overcome in order to reach the happy ending provided by a romantic relationship. Patterns are apparent in how the problem of asexuality can be solved: for instance, asexual characters are frequently romantically paired with partners who are also asexual or otherwise uninterested in sex. Alternatively, an asexual character's partner can renounce sex and commit to celibacy. I discuss the implications of these different possibilities and examine how stories of asexual relationships can function as wish fulfilment fantasies for authors or readers, particularly those who are asexual.

The last results chapter, Chapter 8, focuses on asexual characters in sexual situations. Again, I identify a breadth of discursive possibilities, including stories of sexual coercion, sex that produces fear and disgust, boring sex, sex that produces mixed emotions, and pleasurable sex for asexual characters and their sexual partners. The wide field of possibilities that is opened up when an asexual character engages in sex highlights the diversity of writings about asexual experiences that emerges throughout my analysis.

Chapter 1. Asexuality: Genealogical and Contemporary Perspectives

Sociological research (e.g. MacInnis & Hodson, 2012; Gupta, 2017) shows that many people hold negative views of "asexuals", who are defined herein as "people who have *no* sexual attraction to either sex […] and typically do not engage in sexual activity with others" (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012, p. 730, emphasis in original). Asexual people are seen as less human and less desirable as friends or acquaintances (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012), and they experience pathologization and isolation when they come out as asexual (Gupta, 2017). Where do these negative views come from? And what exactly should we understand asexuality to *be*? Should we view it as a sexual orientation, a set of experiences, a lack of desires and feelings, a constant and immutable trait or a series of choices? To answer these questions, I begin with a short genealogical exploration of how asexual experiences have been studied during the 20th and early 21st century, and subsequently provide an overview of current perspectives in asexuality studies. As Foucault stated, a genealogy or "history of the present" (Garland, 2014) is a way of examining the historical emergence and progression of contemporary issues and concepts. Foucault described a genealogy this way: "I set out from a problem expressed in the terms current today and I try to work out its genealogy. Genealogy means that I begin my analysis from a question posed in the present" (Kritzman, 1988, p. 262). In a genealogical analysis of a question in the present, it is assumed that multiple competing discourses may be present (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016), and that continuities and discontinuities are both present as a concept emerges or changes discursively over time. Thus, I use genealogical methods to examine the emergence of the contemporary concept of asexuality, which is defined loosely herein as the

experience of "not experiencing sexual attraction and/or desire", as it has occurred throughout 20th century discourse and into the present.

A Genealogy of Asexuality

Freudian Origins

Sigmund Freud's views on sexual development and human sexuality greatly influenced Western understandings of sexuality throughout the 20th century (see Whitebook, 1999). In contrast with many of his contemporaries, who viewed sexuality as emerging in adolescence, Freud conceptualized human sexuality as inherent starting from infancy (Freud, 1953b). He introduced the pleasure principle as a key driver of human behaviour. According to the theory of the pleasure principle (also referred to as the pleasure-unpleasure principle), unconscious mental processes strive towards pleasure and away from displeasure (Freud, 1955, p. 36). Freud believed this mechanism to be a "dominant" and powerful principle (p. 36) and in other writing, he referred to the pleasure-seeking instinct as an "almost omnipotent institution" (Freud, 1953a, p. 243). He further believed that the pleasure principle was intimately connected to the sexual instincts, and, indeed, that all pleasure operates through the sexual instincts (Freud, 1953b). According to Freud, children's sexual instincts develop into "the normal sexual life of the adult" (Freud, 1953b, p. 63), which includes "a sexual aim attached to some extraneous sexual object" (p. 63). Even when normal sexuality appears to be diminished or not present, for instance due to neuroses, Freud believed a sexual instinct is still present, but merely repressed or misdirected.

In Freudian discourse, there is no non-pathologized space for subjects who do not experience libidinal or sexual desire. This is visible in his discussions of frigidity in women. According to Freud, the frigid wife does not desire sex with her husband and even "reviles him"

after every sexual act. Her revulsion is not specific to her husband; she does not appear to desire sex with others either. In Freud's view, such frigidity is caused by an unresolved Oedipal conflict that leads to a misdirection of the libido; the woman in question is fixated on her father or brother, rather than her husband (Freud, 1912/1997). He writes:

> There are some who have never got over their parents' authority and have withdrawn their affection from them either very incompletely or not at all. They are mostly girls, who, to the delight of their parents, have persisted in all their childish love far beyond puberty. It is most instructive to find that it is precisely these girls who in their later marriage lack the capacity to give their husbands what is due to them; they make cold wives and remain sexually anaesthetic. (Freud, 1953b, p. 93)

Thus, lack of sexual desire is attributed to a form of misdirection and repression of the sexual instinct. According to Freud, this is a pathology, and importantly, he does not allow for the possibility that some people may have a less potent sexual instinct or no sexual instinct at all. Freud defines the pleasure principle as the main driver of human behaviour and psychic processes, and further posits that the sexual instinct is the form that all pleasure takes. For Freud, a person without a sexual instinct is therefore impossible to imagine—such a person would not only have no interest in sex but would not be able to find any pleasure at all, such as enjoyment in food, dancing, movie-watching, or any other generally pleasurable activity. A subject whose sexual instinct is genuinely absent, but who lives an otherwise normal and pleasant life, thus is rendered impossible within Freud's worldview. Such a person, by virtue of finding enjoyment anywhere, is subject to the pleasure principle. Thus, they must have a sexual instinct, even if it is repressed or is unconscious. Therefore, in Freudian discourse, asexuality—a lack of sexual attraction or desire—is a pathological state that needs to be cured.

Alfred Kinsey and Group X

In the late 1940s and the 1950s, Alfred Kinsey and his research group performed new research into sexuality and sexual behavior, aiming to present an "objective factual study" of human sexual behavior (Kinsey, Pomery, & Martin, 1948). Although they did not extensively study non-sexual behaviours or asexuality, the influential works *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) nonetheless contain some information on how a lack of sexual desire or attraction was viewed in this formative work in sexology studies.

In an effort to clarify the statistical prevalence of homosexual behavior in men and women, Kinsey and his research team created the "heterosexual-homosexual balance", a 7-point scale that could be used to determine whether an individual was "exclusively homosexual", "exclusively heterosexual", or one of the categories in between, such as "equally heterosexual and homosexual" or "predominantly homosexual, but incidentally heterosexual" (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948, p. 639). However, they found that a percentage of their sample did not fit any category on this scale, because they experienced "no socio-sexual contacts or reactions" (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948, p. 656). These individuals "do not respond erotically to either heterosexual or homosexual stimuli, and do not have overt physical contacts with individuals of either sex in which there is evidence of any response" (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953). Such individuals were labeled Group X on the heterosexuality-homosexuality scale. This category applied to about 1.5 per cent of adult men (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948), but a larger percentage of women. In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953), they write that "[a]fter early adolescence there are very few males in this classification […] but a goodly number of females belong in this category in every

age group" (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953, p. 472); they then specify that a Group X categorization was found to apply to about 14 to 19 per cent of unmarried women, one to three per cent of married women, and five to eight per cent of previously married women, all in the age categories of 20 to 35 (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953, p. 474). They speculate that it might be possible for Group X individuals to experience responses to socio-sexual stimuli under specific circumstances that they were unable to identify, but that Group X individuals are "unresponsive and inexperienced as far as it is possible to determine by any ordinary means" (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953, p. 472).

Kinsey and his research group did not conduct much further research on Group X, despite their finding that around 14-19 per cent of adult single women were best classified as members of this group, as well as at least some married women. Therefore, little is known on how Kinsey and his fellow sexologists theorized about this phenomenon. Despite the brevity of their commentary on Group X, a few observations can be made about this discourse on what could be a form of asexuality. First, it should be noted that Kinsey and his colleagues left open the possibility that Group X individuals might "sometimes respond" to sexual stimuli (p. 472). They thus made no theoretical or empirical claims on whether such individuals really never experience such responses, or merely did not experience them in the lab because the correct stimulus was not found. It is also noteworthy in itself that Kinsey and his research group chose not to pursue further study of group X, even though almost one in five single women in their study were so classified, as well as a smaller percentage of married women, formerly married women, and men. A lack of sexual response—chiefly among women—appears to not have been a worthy or sufficiently interesting topic of research for this group of sexologists, perhaps because their approach foregrounds sexual behavior specifically, rather than sexual attitudes, orientations, or

other underlying psychic experiences. Thus, it seems that a group who did not "behave" sexually, was not deemed worthy of further study.

This focus on sexual behaviour, rather than sexual instincts, feelings, or pleasures (although of course these are linked to behaviour) represents a break with the Freudian discourse, which centers on sexual instincts and psychic experiences. In contrast with Freud, Kinsey and his colleagues identified those who experience no response to sexual stimulus as an existing group, but did not approach this group with a treatment-oriented mindset. This approach will later be echoed in the attitudes of contemporary psychologists and sexologists to what will then be termed "asexuality". After Kinsey and before the naming of asexuality in sexology studies, however, the field of psychiatry developed further discourses about lack of sexual desire/attraction that once again centered around the pathology of this phenomenon.

Psychiatry, the DSM-III, and Psychosexual Dysfunction

Freudian psychoanalysis had a continuing influence on psychiatric understanding of psychosexual dysfunction throughout the 20th century. As Katherine Angel points out in her work on the history of "Female Sexual Dysfunction" diagnoses, from the 1930s onward, too much or too little desire (particularly in women) began to be seen as indicative of developmental psychopathology (Angel, 2010), when examined from a psychoanalytic angle. In the 1960s, psychoanalysis came under critique. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) published a new version of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the DSM-III, which shifted from a psychoanalytic focus to an approach of biological psychiatry (Angel, 2010). According to this view, "normal" sexual processes consisted of appetites (i.e. desires/fantasies), mental and

physical excitement, orgasm, and resolution (APA, 1980). Various disturbances to this "normal" pattern were classified as sexual disorders.

Most notable in terms of its relationship to the modern concept of asexuality is the diagnosis of Inhibited Sexual Desire (ISD; APA, 1980). It is characterized by the "persistent and pervasive inhibition of sexual desire" (p. 278), in comparison, that is, to what a clinician judges to be normal based on a person's age, health and other factors. The DSM-III also offers Atypical Psychosexual Dysfunction to capture any related dysfunction that does not fit within the other listed categories. Here, the authors offer the example of "no erotic sensations or even complete anesthesia despite normal physiological components of sexual excitement and orgasm" (p. 281). In both cases, although the DSM-III specifies that a diagnosis will be "rarely made unless the lack of desire is a source of distress" (p. 279), distress is not an experiential *requirement* that is necessary for a person to be diagnosed as such; the lack of sexual attraction or desire in and of itself is sufficient to classify a person as subject to the disorder. Thus, the DSM-III encompasses a variety of experiences of asexuality, including a lack of sexual desire, a lack of erotic sensations, and "complete anesthesia". In all cases, these experiences are regarded as symptoms of a pathology, even if they are not distressing to the individual.

In case descriptions, the patient with ISD is shown to suffer from guilt and repulsion in relation to sex; one patient is described as seeing sex as an "invariably […] unhappy experience" (Spitzer et al., 1981, p. 97). In another text, Lynda Dykes Talmadge and William Talmadge (1986) say low sexual desire is related to "relationship factors such as fear, vulnerability, passive-aggressive styles and intimacy problems" (p. 5). In their view, a sexual relationship is a vital part of any serious romantic relationship, and a problem with the sexual relationship is indicative of an underlying problem, either in the psychological life of the partner with low

desire, or in the relationship itself. Thus, an image of the ISD patient arises as someone who has known sexual pleasure but who, due to relationship problems or personal problems, now experiences a diminished desire that must be rectified through individual or couples' therapy. In descriptions of therapy, it is assumed that all or at least most patients are capable of experiencing sexual desire, although it is acknowledged that people vary in how often they desire sex. Thus, similar to how Freud viewed a lack of sexual interest, psychiatrists and psychologists in the 1980s considered this circumstance to be indicative of a pathology, a problem to be solved.

Interestingly, in both Freud's writing and the DSM-III and related writing, people with low or absent sexual desire are always discussed within the context of relationships. Freud's "frigid wife" is defined partly by her frigidity and partly by her marital status (Freud, 1953). Similarly, although the DSM does not include having a relationship as a necessary criterion for a diagnosis of ISD, casebooks and other studies all discuss ISD as a marital issue, and chiefly as one originating in women. They also focus exclusively on straight couples, which implies asexuality is a straight phenomenon or is only of concern when it affects straight people.

Contemporary Psychology and Asexual Activist Communities

In contemporary psychology, the term "asexuality" is employed to describe people who might formerly have been depicted as frigid or as having ISD. An influential asexuality scholar is Anthony Bogaert, who outlined his view of asexuality in two articles published in 2004 and 2006. He defines asexuality as the experience of "having no sexual attraction for either sex" (2004, p. 279). Based on a survey administered to a representative sample of the British population, Bogaert estimated that about 1 per cent of the population might meet the criteria for the definition of asexuality (Bogaert, 2004).

Bogaert contrasts asexuality with psychiatric diagnoses such as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), which is the more recent name for ISD. As described above, in the case of ISD/HSDD, patients are usually described as people who have had a history of sexual attraction but who are now experiencing problems with sexual desire in the context of a relationship, which are assumed to be treatable through therapies. According to Bogaert, asexuality is unlike ISD/HSDD because it refers to a lifelong absence of sexual attraction, as well as "the *absence* of a traditional sexual orientation" (Bogaert, 2004, p. 279); it is a permanent state of being for the person in question.

Although he takes the position that asexuality is *not* a sexual orientation, since it is the absence of one, Bogaert does discuss the question as to whether or not to view it in this way (Bogaert, 2006). He notes other possible objections to classifying asexuality as a sexual orientation, such as the lack of validity of self-reports (meaning that some people report a lack of sexual attraction, while still responding to sexual stimuli in laboratory studies) and the potential overlap of self-claimed asexual orientation with temporary declines in sexual desire, such as in ISD/HSDD. According to these viewpoints, asexual people have a "real" underlying sexual orientation, such as bisexuality or heterosexuality, which could be made evident through laboratory tests or by the treatment of ISD/HSDD. However, Bogaert notes that these views rely on an essentialist position that assumes an underlying and "presumably biologically determined" (p.246) orientation. In addition, efforts to treat HSDD to "reveal" some underlying orientation are typically ineffective, which suggests that the lack of sexual desire may be the "real" orientation after all. Given this, Bogaert concludes that "the argument can be made" that a person who does not experience and has not experienced sexual attraction toward anyone "is best described as having an asexual orientation" (Bogaert, 2006, p. 247). Asexuality is also described

as a sexual orientation by other contemporary psychologists, such as Padraig MacNeela and

Aisling Murphy in their study of self-identification with asexuality (2015). In part, Bogaert and

other psychologists approach asexuality as a sexual orientation because asexual communities

recently have advocated for this view.

In 2001, David Jay founded the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, or AVEN

(AVEN, 2020a), an advocacy organization that aims to increase "public acceptance […] of

asexuality" and to foster the "growth of an asexual community" (AVEN, 2020a). In their online

materials, AVEN classifies asexuality as a sexual orientation, writing that "asexuality is an

intrinsic part of who we are, just like other sexual orientations" (AVEN, 2020d). According to

the online wiki (i.e., collectively written encyclopedia) associated with AVEN, "[asexuality] is

often conceived of as one of four or more orientations (homosexual, heterosexual,

bisexual/pansexual, asexual)" (AVENwiki, 2020). This view has become widespread throughout

(online) asexual communities, and is evident in magazine interviews with asexual people; for

instance, in an interview in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, a self-described asexual says that "our

orientation is a minority" (Hills & Kobola, 2018).

The views of asexual activist communities therefore have influenced the views of

contemporary psychologists. Bogaert, when claiming that asexuality is best seen as "an asexual

orientation" (Bogaert, 2006, p. 247), says that such a conceptualization is sensitive to the fact

that many people do self-describe as asexual and view themselves as having a sexual orientation.

Likewise, Mark Carrigan's (2011) study of difference and commonality in asexual communities,

works within a framework of asexuality as a sexual orientation because this is the framework

that is used by the communities he studies.

Compared to the frigid wife or the patient with ISD, who are the contemporary people who describe themselves as asexual? Answers to this question can be found in interviews with asexual people. "I don't have any interest in expressing my attraction physically […] even if I am interested in someone," says an asexual person interviewed by *Cosmopolitan,* adding that she does have interest in dating, while another interviewee says: "I'm not a sexual person, but it goes beyond that. I don't have any real interest in dating" (Hills & Kobola, 2018). In contrast with the descriptions of ISD, the three interviewees do not appear to have strong negative emotions about sex. "It's not that I'm repulsed by sex, it just does nothing for me," says one. In an interview with CNN, however, another asexual person describes herself as a repulsed asexual, responding to the thought of sex with "just… eww" (Kinsman, 2014). In addition, there is variation in asexuals' desire for romantic connections. On their website, AVEN states, "Some asexual people may still desire romantic relationships. Other asexual people may be most satisfied with close friendships" (2020).

Thus, a variety of experiences are covered by the contemporary term "asexual" as a self-descriptor. The most important change in comparison to Freudian and DSM conceptualizations of asexuality is that asexual activists and contemporary psychologists have moved away from a framework of pathologization. In these contemporary views, asexuality is not considered something that should or can be cured. Instead, as discussed above, it is conceptualized as an enduring characteristic of asexual people (Bogaert, 2006, MacNeela & Murphy, 2015).

Thus, approaching asexuality through a genealogical lens provides insight into how views about the lack of sexual desire have changed over the last century. While Freud and many subsequent psychiatrists viewed this lack of desire as a pathology, contemporary activists and psychologists now think in terms of identities or traits.

Having identified changes in how asexuality has been viewed over time, I will now discuss how contemporary thinkers in sexuality studies theorize asexuality. It is worth noting that the meaning of asexuality intersects, sometimes invisibly, with issues of race, class, and other axes of marginalization. Although the historical texts and discourses I have discussed do not explore intersecting identities explicitly, they do often entail implicit assumptions about the identities and status of the asexual subjects they discuss in that asexuals are often assumed to be white and middle/upper-class. As I have shown, most historical discourses on asexuality focus on female subjects, and I discuss the intersection of gender and asexuality later in this chapter. On the topic of race and class, racialized subjects, and women of colour in particular, often experience their asexuality as intimately connected to their status as women and as women of colour (Foster et al., 2019). Race and class are important axes of study when theorizing asexuality. The work in this thesis focuses on two asexual characters who are both white, male, and upper-class; but fandom spaces, particularly fanwriting spaces, are often overwhelmingly female and participants may occupy various racialized positions or class spaces. Thus, while the image of asexuality that arises from this thesis may focus on the white, male, upper-class subject, this image may nonetheless be informed by the experiences of its writers as women, people of colour, and/or working-class subjects.

Asexuality Studies

In 2010, Karli June Cerankowski and Meghan Milks asked, "[f]eminist studies, women's studies, gender studies, sexuality studies, gay and lesbian studies, queer studies, transgender studies… asexuality studies?" (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010, p. 650). They were writing about the recent emergence of focused research on asexual people's experiences and their intersection

with gender, feminism, and sexuality studies. Other recent works, such as Ela Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics* (2019) and the book *Asexualities,* also edited by Cerankowski and Milks (2014), similarly examine the recent surge of writing on this topic. Asexuality studies, which is emerging as a field, asks several new questions. In the context of asexuality studies, what is asexuality? Is it an orientation, an experience, or a perspective? And how do intersections between gender and (a)sexuality relate to each other? The answers to these questions are germane ultimately to my analysis of asexual characters in fanfiction.

Revisiting Asexuality as a Sexual Orientation

As I have discussed above, past views on asexual experiences show a shift away from asexuality as a temporary pathological, psychic state toward a notion of asexuality as a durable sexual orientation. Asexuality as a sexual orientation combats the notion of asexuality as a pathology or problem that needs to be resolved (Cerankowski & Milks, 2014). However, conceptualizing asexuality as a sexual orientation can present its own problems—namely, essentialism. Sexual *orientations* are typically understood to be immutable, biological, or in-born, e.g. "born that way" arguments. To speak in terms of orientation is to assume that a person does not choose their sexuality (Stein, 2011); this claim is often used to argue in favour of a sexual community's rights and against discrimination on the basis of the idea that it is unjust for someone to be punished for something they did not choose (Rahman & Jackson, 1997).

There are multiple problems with essentialist stances toward sexual orientations. For instance, Edward Stein argues that this line of reasoning is a risky argument for promoting rights for people with minority orientations, because it can lead back to pathologization. Essentialism can also undermine the push against types of discrimination that focus on behaviors, because

one's behaviors clearly are chosen (Stein, 2011). As a result, when asexual activists cast a lack of sexual desire as an immutable characteristic of a person, they may still open themselves up to a critique of their behavioural choices (e.g., "Why don't you just try having sex?"). In addition, as Steven Seidman points out, essentialist readings of sexual orientation often assume that sexuality can be conceptually separated from other axes of marginalization, such as race and class, because an essentialized idea that sexual orientation is biological is assumed to be universal, regardless of race and class. Seidman says that "as many feminist and gay people of color have argued, these axes of social positioning cannot be isolated […] since they are always intersecting and mutually inflecting" (Seidman, p. 136). Thus, viewing asexuality as a sexual orientation raises theoretical and practical questions. Classifying asexuality as a sexual orientation, when it might more easily be described as an absence of one, may inadvertently support the idea that everyone must have a sexual orientation. It may also further the notion that gay and lesbian rights depend on the idea that sexual orientation is innate, immutable or in-born.

In response to these problems with essentialism, some scholars instead propose an alternate view of asexuality, as neither a pathology nor a sexual orientation. In her introduction to *Asexual Erotics*, Ela Przybylo writes that she "takes for granted that asexuality is a 'legitimate' sexual identity and orientation" (Przybylo, 2019, p. 2) but she also aims to "develop asexuality as a series of perspectives from which sexuality can be examined" (p. 2). Przybylo questions whether asexuality can be easily boiled down to "an absence of sexual attraction" (the definition used by AVEN) and suggests that valuable perspectives and grounds for theory are lost when asexuality hinges only on this idea of absence. In her work, which examines the asexual possibilities of lesbian bed death, spinsterhood, and other phenomena, she writes "less about an identity and more about critiquing sexually overdetermined modes of relating" (p. 3).

This is also why she uses both "asexual" and "nonsexual" as terms to describe similar phenomena, because "asexuality" has become so closely associated with an identitarian nature (p. 29).

Similarly, in their introduction to *Asexuality: Feminist and Queer Perspectives,* KJ Cerankowski and Megan Milks describe the asexual movement as a political attempt to establish asexuality as a sexual orientation (Cerankowski & Milks, 2014, p. 1). They also identify how asexuality can function as a "feminist and queer project" (p. 3). In this sense, asexuality appears to be a series of experiences and vantage points that shed light on how sex and sexuality function in society.

Przybylo, Cerankowski, and Milks all discuss how their views of asexuality have been shaped by their own experiences with asexuality. Their experiences do not fit neatly into any existing framework (e.g., sexual orientations or identities). For instance, Przybylo writes:

> While in many ways I tend toward asexuality, the definition as it is pivoted [sic] by AVEN does not account for my feelings, orientatory inclinations, or manners of relational world-making. […] I came into asexuality in the way I came into queerness: because it provided me with meaningful self-narratives and held open theoretical, activist, and erotic possibilities. (Przybylo, 2019, p. 3)

Similarly, KJ Cerankowski and Megan Milks (2014) describe "rather complicated" histories with asexuality and the asexual community (p. 5). They note that "(a)sexual identification is complex, multi-faceted, and not necessarily fixed in time or in the body" (p. 6), and they write about experiences such as finding asexuality a relevant and accurate term to describe some periods of life, but not others. KJ Cerankowski writes, "no label fits like a well-worn shoe" (p. 6).

This is an experience I share. Asexuality and asexual perspectives have provided me with meaning and self-understandings that no other perspectives provide; yet, like Przybylo, I find AVEN's definition of asexuality as a sexual orientation to lack the complexity that speaks accurately to my experiences with sex, relationships, romance, and belonging. In discussing this uneasy identification with my partner, she commented that complicated feelings about the term "asexuality" seems to be an almost universal—or at least common—experience among those who use it: "It seems to amount to a big ol', 'Well, it's a better definition than nothing' a resounding 'eh, close enough'."

Given current perspectives in asexuality studies and my own experiences, I regard the term asexuality to encompass a variety of perspectives, behaviors, experiences, and self-descriptors. Although it is often used to describe a stable sexual orientation by members of the asexual activist community, within academic queer/asexuality studies, the potential of asexuality is broader. Asexuality therefore functions for me as a *perspective*: a point of view from which to examine sexual and non-sexual relationship phenomena, and a way of determining how relationships and individual experiences are shaped by the expectation of sex and sexuality as a dominant force in human lives.

Compulsory Sexuality

The expectation that sex is an important, even vital aspect of every person's life, experiences, and relationships is referred to as compulsory sexuality. In a 2015 essay, Kristina Gupta uses the term compulsory sexuality to refer to "the assumption that all people are sexual" (p. 132). Compulsory sexuality also encompasses "the social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of non-sexuality, such as a lack of sexual desire or behavior, and

compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity" (p. 132). Gupta's concept of compulsory sexuality builds on Adrienne Rich's analysis of compulsory heterosexuality, which referred to the system of norms that compel women to engage in heterosexual behaviors (Rich, 1980). It is also related to Foucault's understanding of the deployment of sexuality; in *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1*, Foucault explains that in Western societies, people have come to see sex as the key to who they are as subjects (Foucault, 1976/1990).

As Gupta suggests, compulsory sexuality is a broader concept than compulsory heterosexuality alone. It can include the pressure within LGBT+ groups and communities for their members to engage in sexual behaviors. As Megan Milks and KJ Cerankowski discuss when they outline their personal (a)sexual experiences, this pressure can be alienating to asexual-identified individuals (Cerankowski & Milks, 2014). But as Kristina Gupta explains, this pressure can affect not only asexual-identified individuals; the idea of compulsory sexuality is also useful in exploring why people of any sexual orientation face pressure to engage in a certain amount or type of sexual activity (Gupta, 2019).

Gupta discusses how compulsory sexuality provides a useful lens for scholars in multiple contexts. It allows them to examine how (under)privileged groups of people are sexualized or hypersexualized, or to critique the notion that sexual liberation is key to destabilizing oppressive norms. However, the lens of compulsory sexuality also has its limitations, most notably the risk of essentializing asexuality as an inherent characteristic that arises outside of societal norms (Gupta, 2019).

Asexuality, Queerness, and Queer Studies

Thus far, I have presented a view of asexuality as a complicated set of experiences and perspectives that revolve around a non-connection to sexuality and sexual experiences. This perspective provides new insight into society's sexual relations and compulsory sexuality. Viewing asexuality in this way raises questions about the position of asexuality vis-à-vis queerness and queer studies. Is asexuality queer, and if so, in what ways?

The General FAQ of AVEN at asexuality.org contains the question "I think asexuality is inherently queer. Do you agree?" (AVEN, 2020c). AVEN answers this question by saying that "[s]ome asexual people may identify as queer" and that it is "up to the individual to determine if they identify as "queer" or as part of the LGBT+ population" (AVEN, 2020c). This response foregrounds both the ambivalence in asexuality's relationship to queer theory/queerness and LGBT+ theory/community, and the shift in what "queer" has come to mean in different circumstances. AVEN points out that asexual people may "identify as queer", a fact that is mirrored in my own conversations with asexual individuals who use "queer" as a label or identity for themselves and as a way to connect with other people (asexual or not) who also refer to themselves as "queer". This use of queerness as a form of identity politics deviates quite sharply from how the term is used in queer studies, where "queerness" as a theoretical and cultural concept is linked to sexual practices or experience as opposed to identity politics.

In *The Trouble With Normal* (1999), Michael Warner explores queer ethics and the ethics of shame to come to a vision of queer theory. He writes that stigma and shame play vital roles in society's approach to sex and sexuality. He argues that stigma and shame are deployed against those who behave in "bad, abnormal, unnatural" ways (Warner, 1999, p. 25) in terms of homosexuality, promiscuity, public sex or sadomasochism. As Warner writes, the norms of

straight culture all line up with each other, so that "if you are born with male genitalia, the logic goes, you will behave in masculine ways, desire women, desire feminine women, desire them exclusively, have sex in what are thought to be normally active and insertive ways and within officially sanctioned contexts, think of yourself as heterosexual […] and never change any part of this package from childhood to senescence" (p. 38). As he notes, deviating "at any point" from this total package brings a person into conflict with straight culture. Asexual experiences can certainly be said to disrupt this heterosexual package in a variety of ways, such as not desiring sex with the "correct" gender/sex, not desiring femininity or masculinity as required by the heterosexual norm, not having any sex despite opportunities to do so (let alone having sex in "normally active" ways), or not thinking of oneself as heterosexual. Because asexuality deviates in multiple ways from heterosexual norms, many asexuals have affinities with queerness and queer identity politics (Cerankoswki & Milks, 2010).

Another way in which asexual individuals may benefit from queer perspectives is in queerness' simultaneous rejection of the "normal" and the "pathological". As Warner writes, "the word "queer" is […] a way of saying: 'We're not pathological, but don't think for that reason that we want to be normal'" (Warner, 1999, p. 59). This attitude toward society's judgments about someone's deviation from the heterosexual norm is also visible in interviews with asexual people, such as in Kristina Gupta's interview study (2017), the title of which expresses this idea in part: "And now I'm just different, but there's nothing actually wrong with me". Asexual experiences therefore correspond to queer narratives in many important ways.

However, asexuality may also conflict with queer theory. In his book, Warner advocates for "a frank embrace of queer sex in all its apparent indignity" (p. 74). He later notes that "it is inhuman to mandate asexual life for anyone, let alone for queers, for whom sexual culture is a

principal mode of sociability" (p. 217). Asexuality and asexual theory do not mandate an asexual life for anyone, but they do conflict with sexual culture as a "principal mode" of sociability. Asexuals, as discussed above, often face pressure to engage in sexual behaviors or sexual culture when they are in LGBT+ groups, thus coming directly into conflict with the sexual culture that is held by Warner to be a main feature of what it means to act queer, be queer, or embrace queerness. Asexuality does not challenge society's shame and stigma around certain sexual behaviors, but asexual people do find themselves excluded from the sexual "normal"—pathologized and othered—in a way that produces an affinity with many of the goals and ideas of queerness and queer culture. Therefore, asexuality can be said to exist in an uneasy tension with queer theory and politics. While asexuality can challenge sexual norms, just as many queer behaviors do, it is nonetheless different from queerness, at least, as it is described by Warner and other queer theorists. In a sense, asexuality queers queerness itself, because it challenges queer theories' assumption that queer deviations from the heterosexual norm move in one direction toward more/wrong sex, as opposed to moving in the (asexual) direction of *less*/wrong sex. Asexuality questions whether queer theory is equipped to address all the ways in which society shames and stigmatizes sexual difference.

Asexuality and Gender

Many early writings in the field of asexuality studies focus on intersections between asexuality, queerness and feminism. Much of the work in this field therefore examines how asexuality and femininity overlap, interact or diverge. For instance, Ela Przybylo's *Asexual Erotics* (2019) examines asexual understandings of lesbian bed death, teenage girlhood, elderly spinsterhood and political celibacy among feminists, as well as referencing asexual potential in

Boston marriages, frigidity and religious understandings of virginity. Perhaps, these examinations of asexuality in a feminist context are unsurprising: as the genealogical exploration earlier in this chapter shows, historical understandings of low/no sexual desire are often explored only in the context of womanhood or femininity. Freud's clearest depiction of a lack of sexual desire centers on frigid women, and the DSM's description of patients with ISD focuses on female experiences.

By contrast, this research focuses on two male characters. Some work has been done on the intersection between masculinity and asexuality, such as an essay in *Asexualities* in which Ela Przybylo analyses three interviews with asexual men (2014). Similarly, Kristina Gupta interviewed asexual men and women to determine how gender differentiates asexual experiences (2019). Both Przybylo and Gupta note that asexual men tend to be highly aware of societal pressure to engage in sex (Przybylo, 2014, p. 228; Gupta, 2019, p. 1211). Gupta found that asexual feelings or identifications conflict more with masculinity than they do with femininity. All the men she interviewed felt that their asexual experiences put them at odds with performing hegemonic masculinity, while some of the women participants experienced little conflict between their asexual experiences and their conformity with hegemonic femininity (Gupta, 2019, p. 1211). Thus, asexual masculinities specifically appear to be at odds with hegemonic masculinity (Przybylo, 2014, p. 239).

Research Contributions

Having examined genealogical and contemporary perspectives on asexuality, I now turn to the question of what this research contributes to the knowledge on asexuality. As I have highlighted, asexuality and asexual themes have been discussed, explored and depicted in many

different forms throughout the twentieth century. Asexually-themed fanfiction is one of these forms. In the subsequent sections, I examine how fanfiction depicts asexuality, and how its depictions may overlap with, be in contrast with, or differ from genealogical and contemporary perspectives about asexuality that have already been discussed above. Based on my experiences reading asexual fanfiction prior to the start of this project, my expectation is that the depiction of asexuality within these works is informed largely by the discourse of asexual activists, AVEN, and contemporary psychological understandings of asexuality as a sexual orientation. As I have shown, these perspectives often differ from asexuality scholars' views about what asexuality is and can be. My work contributes to genealogical understandings of asexuality, shed additional light on contemporary perspectives about asexuality, and provide an entry point for critically rethinking concepts about asexuals, for instance, in light of Gupta's ideas about compulsory sexuality and the intersections between masculinity and asexuality.

Chapter 2. Fan Communities, Fanfiction, and Fanfiction Studies

For centuries, human societies worldwide have engaged positively and enthusiastically with a wide variety of forms of storytelling. In the second half of the 20th century, scholars of communication studies began to research groups of people who display high levels of enthusiasm and engagement with a specific work—or set of works—of storytelling, such as a movie, (comic) book or TV series (Jenkins, 1992). Soon, communication studies researchers began to study a particular form of fan engagement: the writing of fan stories, also known as fanfiction, fan fiction, or fic. In this chapter, I discuss how fanfiction is defined, provide an overview of the history of fanfiction research, examine how marginalized groups in particular have been portrayed in fic, and argue for the best approaches to study fanfiction in this thesis. This discussion provides the theoretical underpinnings from which I study fanfiction depicting Sherlock Holmes and Tony Stark as asexual characters.

Defining Fandom and Fanfiction

As fan cultures scholar Matt Hills writes, "everybody knows what a fan is" (Hills, 2002, p. ix), yet arriving at a singular definition of fan cultures or fans is often challenging from an academic perspective. Fanfiction similarly is difficult to define in a single sentence; however, many scholars have explored the outlines and boundaries of fanfiction. The term "fanfiction" arose in science fiction fandoms before coming into broader use among pop culture fans (Coppa, 2017). Fanfiction can encompass a wide range of story types and genres. Fanfiction scholar Francesca Coppa (2017) defines fanfiction using five criteria, which I will discuss briefly in the context of other scholarship on fanfiction.

First, fanfiction is fiction created "outside the marketplace" (Coppa, 2017, p. 2). This means it is amateur work, which is not monetized. Some fanfiction, especially in science fiction fandoms, is written by authors who aspire to be published. Fanfiction may then function as practice writing and can be seen as proto- or pseudo-professional. However, authors of fanfiction often do not write their stories out of a desire to publish or gain monetary recompense; the work is "written for love rather than for money" (Coppa, 2017, p. 3). Instead, fan cultures often operate within their own gift-based economies, where fanfiction or fanart is produced and gifted to other fans or exchanged for a different piece of fanart (Hellekson, 2009). In my own experience within fandoms, authors of fanfiction may also consider themselves to be "paid" or rewarded through comments, likes, reblogs or other forms of online engagement. Thus, fanfiction economies can take many complex forms, but a key characteristic is that they are divorced from the capitalist marketplace where fiction can be purchased for money.

The second defining characteristic of fanfiction is that it transforms existing stories. In a *Time* piece in 2011, Lev Grossman defined fanfiction as "stories and novels that make use of the characters and settings from other people's […] work" (Grossman, 2011). As Veerle van Steenhuyse (2011) writes, this means that the universes in which fanfiction takes place are "transformed universes" based on existing texts. This is why they are experienced by their authors and readers as highly immersive (Van Steenhuyse, 2011, p. 2). Coppa (2017) points out that the transformative aspect of fanfiction connects it to age-old cultural traditions of re-imagining existing stories. Transformative or derivative work is not exclusive to fanfiction. It can also be seen in folk literature, oral histories, and many contemporary published works, such as Disney's re-imaginings of fairytales. Some published novels could also be considered fanfiction according to this criterion, such as the 2009 novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*

by Seth Grahame-Smith (see Yin, Aragon, Evans & Davis, 2017), although of course these published novels are monetized and thus do not meet the first criterion.

The third fanfiction characteristic is that the stories on which fanfiction is based are 'owned', i.e. copyrighted, by people other than the fanfiction author (Coppa, 2017; Lipton, 2014). This distinguishes fanfiction from Disney movies or *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which are based on material that is no longer under copyright. Although most legal scholars consider fanfiction legally permissible under Fair Use doctrines, its legal position can be precarious (see Lipton, 2014, or Tushnet, 1997, for an in-depth exploration of this topic). As Coppa (2017) points out, the legal status of fanfiction has served to marginalize its creators, who are disproportionately women and minorities (Coppa, 2017, p. 6). She also notes that this aspect of fanfiction illuminates the way cultural stories can be "owned" and monetized as a result of the legal notion of copyright, which is a relatively recent phenomenon. Fanfiction arose as a category of storytelling only after copyright became a legal reality, but the phenomenon of re-telling stories is not new; as Coppa states, "Fanfiction is what happened to folk culture" (Coppa, 2017, p. 7).

Fourth, scholars of fanfiction emphasize the communal aspect of fanfiction writing (Coppa, 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Stein & Busse, 2009). Fanfiction is "written within and to the standards of a particular fannish community" (Coppa, 2017) and often written within communities that also provide writing mentorship (Evans et al., 2017). The genre, style, and content are derived not merely from the work on which the fanfiction is based, but also on conventions within that particular fan community (fandom); as Stein and Busse (2009) write, "these fan communities constitute discursive contexts" that can be as important as the source text in shaping how fanfiction is written. Fanwriting communities have also developed their own

literary conventions, such as common tropes, arch-plots and thematic choices (Coppa, 2017), often indicated by a wide range of tags and terminology with which fans are familiar. For instance, a popular post on Tumblr marvels at the fact that many fans easily understand the sequence of tags "ao3 mcu a:aou abo bdsm ot3 hs au pwp" as a very specific description of a particular type of pornographic fanfiction (bootycap, 2014). A few examples of common storytelling tools and tropes in fanfiction include the "coffeeshop alternate universe" in which characters meet and fall in love in a coffeeshop, "genderswap" stories in which the gender/sex of characters is different from their original depiction, or the "5+1" format, in which characters experience a particular situation five times (with varying results) and then a sixth time with a plot twist. These unique conventions of fanfiction emphasize its close connection to the fan communities from which it originates.

The fifth characteristic of fanfiction is its focus on character (Coppa, 2017). As Mary Ellen Curtin points out, "Fanfiction is speculative fiction where the speculation is a story or person thought of as a character" (Curtin, 2012), as opposed to science fiction speculative fiction, which speculates about aspects of its invented world. Fanfiction asks "what if?" questions about its characters (Coppa, 2017, p. 13). Indeed, when I describe fanfiction to acquaintances, who are unfamiliar with the concept, I usually start my explanation by giving an example such as "what if Harry Potter was in Slytherin?". Coppa notes that the speculative nature of fanfiction opens up opportunities for exploring social identities by asking "what if a character were female, Black, Jewish, queer, disabled?" (Coppa, 2017, p. 13). Indeed, my research in essence studies 100 responses to the question of "what if Tony Stark/Sherlock Holmes was asexual?", emphasizing the importance of the character-transforming speculative nature of fanfiction.

Many fanfiction stories meet all five of the above criteria, but not all do. In my view, only the first three criteria are necessary in order to identify a work as fanfiction, while the latter two characteristics function as common features of fic rather than as features that are required for a work to be identified as fanfiction. For instance, a transformative story about a popular text such as Star Trek, which is produced online for free, but is rejected by most readers because it fails to meet the standards of a fan community—i.e., it meets the first three criteria but not the fourth— will still be seen as fanfiction by other fans. The fact that it is "bad" fanfiction—because it fails to meet community standards—does not mean it is not fanfiction. However, the boundaries of what constitutes fic can be diffuse; accurately characterizing edge cases can be difficult, such as in the case of E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), which originated as fanfiction of *Twilight* (Meyer, 2008) and still bears its characteristics, but is now published and therefore no longer meets the first criterion.

Although the fourth and fifth characteristics should perhaps not be used to exclude any work from being defined as fanfiction, Mary Ellen Curtin (2012) points out that fans do use these criteria to judge fanfiction. She writes:

> The more a story-telling culture involves a community playing together with a set of characters, plots, or tropes, the more it will 'feel' like fanficdom. Conversely, if fanfic is produced in isolation, without reference to other stories and storytellers, it will 'feel' less like fanfic even if it fulfills the simple definition of being a transformative work. (Curtin, 2012).

Thus, all five characteristics together form an appropriate view of what fanfiction is and how it develops within fan communities.

Writing fanfiction is still sometimes seen as an odd or niche pursuit, but in actuality, fanfiction reaches wide audiences. For instance, the popular fic repository Archive of Our Own (archiveofourown.org, also known as AO3) has over 2 million registered users as of July 2019 (Organization for Transformative Works, 2019). By June 2020, more than six million works had been published on AO3. Many works, particularly in popular fandoms, receive hundreds, thousands or even tens of thousands of views, likes and comments. Thus, the cultural impact of fanfiction is arguably significant.

History of Fan Studies and Fan Fiction Studies

As discussed above, fanfiction arises out of centuries-old traditions of communal storytelling. It can be connected to early texts such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, rewrites of Jane Austen novels by her readers, and Sherlock Holmes fans creating pastiches. Fanfiction that meets all the criteria above, however, first began emerging in the 1960s and 70s in science fiction fandoms (Hellekson & Busse, 2014). These fandom communities and their communal writings first inspired academics to begin studying fans, eventually leading to the emergence of fan studies and fan fiction studies in the 1980s (Hellekson & Busse, 2014; Jenkins, 1992).

Early Fan Studies

Early fan studies focused on how fanfiction functions as literature as well as how fan communities interact. A foundational text is Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (1992), in which he explores how fans skillfully use and adapt cultural texts to fit their communal needs. In his chapter on fan writing, Jenkins explores the writing of "slash" writing. These stories depict romantic or sexual relationships between two men; the characters in the pairing were often listed

separated by a slash, e.g. Kirk/Spock, hence the name of the genre (Jenkins, 1992, p. 186). As Jenkins points out, slash fanfiction can be seen as a response to constructions of male sexuality in popular culture, transgressing against traditional boundaries of gender and sexuality. Even when slash stories consist entirely of sexual situations, they still tend to be driven by speculative questions about characters and the relationship between them and their cultures. Jenkins concludes that slash is "not so much a genre about sex as it is a genre about the limitations of traditional masculinity" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 191). Jenkins explores the various angles scholars have taken in studying slash fanfiction, from viewing slash as female pornography (see also Joanna Russ, 2014), to viewing it as a form of androgynous romance, a form of cross-gender identification for women (who are estimated to make up at least 90 per cent of fan writers), or a method for exploring homosocial desire (Jenkins, 1992).

In his conclusion to the chapter, Jenkins notes that "slash… has many progressive elements […]. Yet, fan writers also accept uncritically many ways of thinking about gender that originate within the commercial narratives. […] Slash, like most of fan culture, represents a negotiation rather than a radical break with the ideological construction of mass culture" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 219). This view is also adopted by other fan studies scholars, such as the prominent scholar Matt Hills. In his influential 2002 volume *Fan Cultures,* he writes from a "suspensionist perspective […] which refuses to split fandom into the 'good' and the 'bad' and which embraces inescapable contradiction" (p. xiii), highlighting how fan cultures cannot be boiled down to single perspectives, but instead straddle contradictions and engage in complex negotiations with source texts. In following Jenkins and Hills as I outline throughout this thesis how fan writers portray asexual identities, the question arises of the extent to which fan writers negotiate, break with, or repurpose cultural ideas about asexuality within fanfiction.

From "Slash Fic" To Other Marginalized Groups in Fanfiction

As can be seen from the discussion above, most research into fanfiction focuses on slash fic, i.e. romantic/sexual fic about male-male pairings. Much of this research will be relevant to the asexual portrayals of the characters I am studying, in part because asexual characters—like asexual people—do often have romantic or even sexual relationships. As I show later, many stories containing an asexual Tony Stark or asexual Sherlock Holmes portray these characters in male/male relationships. However, it is important to also examine how fan fiction scholars have studied less commonly portrayed marginalized groups in fanfiction, and what this reveals about marginalized fans. Some studies have focused on the portrayal of lesbian relationships, racialized characters, or marginalized gender experiences (e.g. feminist themes or transgender themes).

When lesbian relationships are portrayed in fanfiction, in a genre usually referred to as "femslash", this often opens up new possibilities for articulating women's queerness. The portrayal of lesbian relationships in fanfiction is of interest both for what it can reveal about fans' understandings of lesbianism, and for its implications for femininity and girlhood (Kapurch, 2015). For instance, Katie Kapurch discusses how lesbian portrayals of Merida and Rapunzel, two Disney princesses, provide opportunities for the depiction of girlhoods that are "pink" and princess-themed, but do not rely on "lying in bed and wishing that a prince would come" (Kapurch, 2015, p. 450). Fanfiction thus opens up new possibilities for girlhood and queerness that are not present in the Disney source text.

Both in slash fiction and femslash fiction, the most commonly portrayed characters are white; the scholarships that have studied such texts by extension also are primarily focused on the sexual/gender experiences of white characters. Rukmini Pande and Swati Moitra (2017)

discuss the intersection of race/sexuality in femslash fanfiction. Like Kapurch, they identify femslash as offering possibilities for articulating women's queerness; however, they note that the ways in which this is approached are necessarily always tied up in race and racial identity. This becomes overt when analyzing interracial queer relationships in femslash, but racial dynamics are of course also present when only white characters are visible. The influence of whiteness on portrayals of queer femininity often goes unexamined, both within fandom communities and in the scholarly work about them, and should be taken into account when studying femslash. For instance, it should be noted that Kapurch's analysis of feminitity and queerness in Disney fanfiction focuses on two white characters, and by extension foregrounds white femininities and white forms of queerness.

It should be noted that there are also many fandom communities that center on media containing racialized characters, particularly in Japan, China and Korea. This includes fandoms which focus on anime and manga, as well as "real-person" fandoms, such as fans of Korean pop groups. In contrast with fandoms of Western media, these fandoms are usually not predominantly English-speaking. This necessarily limits the influence of these fandom communities on Western fandom communities; the customs and standards of these fandoms can therefore diverge from each other. For instance, according to the South China Morning Post, Chinese fandom communities more often operate in a culture where fans relate to celebrities—such as actors—by considering themselves their idol's "mother figures" with the authority to rebuke them (Jing Daily, 2020). They also consider commercial support for their idols, such as through buying merchandise, as a task for which they are responsible as fans. Western fans, on the other hand, are more likely to look up to their idols, feel hesitant to rebuke them as a parent would, and are less likely to see monetary support for their idol as a core part of their fandom

(Jing Daily, 2020). This shows that fandom itself, as well as source texts and source characters, each contribute racial and cultural dynamics.

Benjamin Woo analyzed a number of studies that attempted to identify the racial make-up of Western fandoms; he concluded that "fandom is somewhat whiter than the population at large" (Woo, 2017, p. 247). In addition, class positions can influence how fans and fandoms operate. As I described earlier in this chapter, Western fandoms tend to operate on gift economies rather than moneyed economies, meaning that they can at least theoretically be accessible across class lines. However, access to technology such as computers, smartphones or the Internet and access to leisure time may limit working class people's ability to engage in fandom. Benjamin Woo also points out that class-based access to fandoms may contribute somewhat to the racialized dynamics of fandom, but that the ideological whiteness of fans and fandoms plays a more important role, stating that the "constructed category of *media fans* is not only demographically but also ideologically white, and these two factors are not unrelated" (Woo, 2017).

Transgender people are another marginalized group whose portrayal in fic has been studied. Fanfiction offers many different ways of depicting gender, sex, genderbending, gender-nonconformity, and transgender characters. First, "genderbent" or "always a different sex" stories imagine a character as a different sex without necessarily utilizing trans narratives: for instance, Sherlock Holmes may be portrayed as the cisgender woman Shirley Holmes, while continuing to be a genius detective. Although such stories can examine differences in treatment between men and women, they do not necessarily speak to trans issues. More relevant are what Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian refer to as "genderfuck" stories, in which sci-fi or fantasy tropes (magic, alien technology, futuristic medical interventions etc.) are used to "alter and

reimagine characters' sexed and gendered bodies" (Busse & Lothian, 2009, p. 1). Such stories, they find, often combine fanfic's common romantic tropes with political and activist forms of agency (Busse & Lothian, 2009).

Alternately, trans narratives can be explored by imagining any character as a trans man, trans woman, or nonbinary person. Jonathan Rose (2020) examined fanfic in which John Watson, Sherlock Holmes's friend and assistant, is portrayed as a trans man. In studying these stories, together with the comments that readers leave in response and a podcast discussing trans fic, Rose concludes that trans fic plays an important role in providing recognizable stories for trans audiences, as well as trans awareness for cis audiences (Rose, 2020).

The work done by fanfiction scholars to examine the depiction of racialized people, lesbians and transgender characters reveals the closely intertwined relationship between fanfiction and marginalized communities. Fic can centre these underrepresented groups, provide awareness for its audiences, and disrupt dominant narratives around gender and sexuality. These themes are important when discussing the asexual fiction on which this research focuses. The research into racialized characters (and fans) further shows the importance of questioning *whose* (a)sexuality is portrayed in any given story. As I discussed in Chapter 1, Sherlock Holmes and Tony Stark are both white characters—as are the characters with whom they are most frequently romantically involved with in fanfiction. In addition, they are both upper-class. This means that the asexuality that is being studied is a white, upper-class and male asexuality. However, this asexuality is written about by a group of fanfiction authors that is more diverse. Although I do not study the social makeup of the sample of fic authors in this work, it is plausible that they are largely female and may come from a variety of class and racial backgrounds.

Fanfiction and Asexuality

Having thus reviewed the history of studying fanfiction, and of studying marginalized groups in fanfiction in particular, I now turn to the presence of asexuality in fanfiction. As shown above, academic work on lesbian and transgender depictions in fanfiction is scarce; asexuality in fanfiction has been studied even less. The only published work on the topic is a book chapter by Lýsa Westberg Gabriel (2018), who explores bodily autonomy in asexual fanfiction. Similar to the methodology I employ, Westberg Gabriel read and analyzed 100 asexual fanfics. In contrast with my methodology, she did not pick specific fandoms, and her sample was half randomized and half selected based on publication year and number of comments. She concluded firstly that "not only does asexual fan fiction serve as entertainment, but also as a therapeutic tool for asexuals and as an informative channel to spread knowledge about asexuality" (Westberg Gabriel, 2018, p. 39). Asexual fanfiction thus serves a variety of purposes for the communities who read and write it and is generally closely linked to the communities from which it arises. Asexual fanfiction thus exemplifies several of the defining features of fanfiction, such as its propensity to ask character-based "what if" questions—including "what if this character is asexual?"—and its close ties to the asexual fan community.

Westberg Gabriel found multiple types of asexual fanfiction, including stories where asexuality is mentioned but has no effect on the plot, informational stories that aim to explain asexuality to the reader through the voices of the characters, and "cock-cures-all" narratives, in which the asexuality is cured or otherwise disappears once the asexual character has a satisfying sexual experience. The most common, however, were what Westberg Gabriel refers to as "body-otherwise-bound" stories (p. 40), in which the asexual character is romantically paired with another character who faces their own constraints on bodily autonomy, such as through

disability, confinement or outside control. Westberg Gabriel proposes that these body confinements may function as a way to level the playing field of power between asexual characters and their non-asexual partners. In Westberg Gabriel's 100-fic sample, six fics were classified as "third-wave fiction", which subverted or changed common asexual fanfic tropes; Westberg Gabriel suggests that these works might form the future of asexual fanfiction.

This analysis by Westberg Gabriel shows that asexual fanfiction may encompass a variety of story types. Writing for a larger volume exploring consent and body within fanfiction, Westberg Gabriel foregrounded the concerns of bodily autonomy in asexual fanfiction. However, this leaves many other themes unexplored, including the emotional valences of asexuality in fanfiction and the circumstances under which asexual characters engage in relationships or sex. In studying Iron Man and Sherlock fic specifically, I explore these themes in more depth and show which additional story types and themes are present within asexual fanfiction.

Approaches to Studying Fanfiction

As Hellekson and Busse (2014) point out in their introduction to *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, and as can be seen in Jenkins's approach to slash fiction, fanfiction can be approached in multiple ways from a scholarly perspective. Fanfiction can be seen, among other things, as an interpretation of the source text, which provides literary information on the primary text and its characters (Hellekson & Busse, 2014). It can also be seen as a sociopolitical argument when the analysis focuses on feminist or queer reappropriations of the source text. In addition, fan fiction can be examined either as an individual engagement or identificatory practice, or as a communal gesture, which forms part of a larger audience response (Hellekson & Busse, 2014). Given these many roles that fanfiction is capable of playing, multiple approaches may be appropriate for

studying the contents, meanings, effects and connections present in fanfiction. I will here outline

two approaches which are important for my work: a literary approach that examines the

transformative nature of fanfiction, and a critical approach in which fanfiction is used as a lens

for studying gender/sexuality.

As shown above, Henry Jenkins was an early voice in the analysis of fanfiction as

literature. He employs the term "poaching" to refer to fans' strategies of active reading, in which

fans construct alternative, oppositional or complementary understandings of source texts, seeking

out ambiguities in the original work (Jenkins, 1992). The production of new material, including

fanfiction but also songs, videos, performances and art, then results in new works, which often

hold both harmonies and tensions with the original. Cornel Sandvoss (2014) points out that this

fan behavior foregrounds the notion of intertextuality and that it builds on the notion of the death

of the author. Sandvoss proposes that in studying fandom and fanfiction, we find that meaning

arises from the interaction between text and reader (Sandvoss, 2014). This is why, as Sandvoss

says, "studies of fan audiences have challenged the idea of 'correct' or even dominant readings"

(Sandvoss, 2014, p. 69).

In my project, which studies fanfiction that posits "what if this character is asexual?", this

notion of tension between the original and the transformative work, as well as the notion that no

reading is necessarily "correct", is important. Imagining a character as asexual may challenge

meanings that seem self-evident in the source text. For instance, the notion that a notorious

playboy like Tony Stark may instead be "read" or portrayed as someone who is repulsed by sex,

initially seems to starkly oppose the source text. In what ways can such a transformative text

instead provide new readings for the source text, producing new aesthetics and understandings

within this tension? And how does this differ or overlap with "reading" or portraying Sherlock

Holmes as asexual, when this character is usually already read as focusing on rationality and as aversive to relationships?

These questions can also benefit from the second approach to studying fanfiction. This approach employs critical methods to use fanfiction as a site in which to explore themes around gender, sexuality or other social categories of difference. Similar to the literary view outlined above, this approach has its roots in early fan(fiction) studies. In 1985, Joanna Russ published the provocative essay "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love", sparking controversy giving the debates surrounding pornography at that time in feminist circles (Russ, 2014). In her essay, she explores the contents of so-called K/S Zines, collections of often pornographic stories about the *Star Trek* characters Kirk and Spock. Throughout her discussion, Russ foregrounds the connections between the content of the K/S pornography and real-world gender relations and sexuality. She notes that this pornography plays an important role in the lives of the women who write or read it, producing new meanings in their own sexual relations to themselves and to other people (Russ, 2014). In addition, she notes what fanfiction can reveal about notions of androgyny and masculinity held by its authors and readers (Russ, 2014). Her essay thus shows the intricate connections between meanings in fanfiction and a broader set of cultural understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, love and romance, by focusing on the ways fanfiction counters the meanings of gender and sexuality in the texts on which it is based. Similarly, Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith (2014), in an essay first published in 1986, examine how women authors of fanfiction use and subvert traditional patterns of gender relations to form new meanings. This critical approach to reading fanfiction thus uses fanfiction as a lens to examine gender/sex relations.

However, the essays written by Russ and by Lamb and Veith in the early decades of fan scholarship may give too limited a view to be applied to the complexities of contemporary fans' positions relative to cultural understandings of sex and gender. As Matt Hills points out, fan cultures should be viewed as contradictory in some ways, with fans often accepting and rejecting fan texts simultaneously and taking up roles as both consumers and anti-commercialists (Hills, 2002). In a 2002 essay, Sarah Gwellian Jones examines the work of Russ and of Lamb and Veith in studying the meanings of slash as subversive/oppositional forms of pornography. She notes that the essays by Russ and Lamb/Veith both position slash fanfiction as "subversive" or "resistant" (Jones, 2014). Jones questions this understanding, pointing out that characters such as Kirk and Spock do have close relationships in their source texts. Cult television series are unlike "the ordinary world" (p. 122), and heterosexual romance often fails within these fictional worlds, while close primary relationships between same-sex pairings frequently take center-stage. Thus, Jones reasons that the depiction of these relationships as primary emotional and sexual bonds in fanfiction is not necessarily or always subversive/resistant (Jones, 2014). She calls into question the assumption of early fanfiction scholars that fanfiction is by its nature subversive or resistant. The question therefore should be when and how fanfiction may resist, subvert, or be in tension with source texts and dominant cultural understandings of gender/sexuality. Additionally, when does it highlight subversive patterns that are already present in source texts and when is it not subversive or resistant to dominant cultural narratives at all?

This question of subversiveness/resistance is relevant to the fanfiction I study in this project. As discussed above, asexual possibilities are more present in the source material surrounding the character of Sherlock, than in the source material surrounding the character of Tony Stark. Thus, the question of when and how an asexual reading is oppositional to the source

text is important. In addition, the critical approach to studying fanfiction can be used to examine how the appearance of asexuality in fanfiction can speak to broader understandings and experiences of asexuality outside fanfiction.

Positioning Myself as a Fan and Scholar

The relationship between fans and fandom scholarship is occasionally contentious. According to fandom scholar Matt Hills, fandom creates discursive subjectivities that are "open" and not "resolutely rational" (Hills, 2002, p. 7); this often contrasts with the subjectivities of academics, which are presumed by fans to be "passionless [and] hyper-rational" (Hills, 2002, p. 7). This conflict obviously complicates the position of those who are *both* fans and scholars. Matt Hills examines positions such as that of the scholar-fan, who "must still conform to the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject, being careful not to present too much of their enthusiasm" (Hills, 2002, p. 11), because the scholar-fan then runs the risk of losing the respect afforded to the "good and rational academic" (p. 12). He contrasts this position with that of the fan-scholar, the "elite fan" who is so committed to gaining knowledge about the object of their fandom that they effectively become scholars themselves, though "*not quite* academic scholars" (Hills, 2002, p. 17, emphasis in original). Both the scholar-fan and the fan-scholar are "necessarily liminal in their identities" (p. 19), because they straddle the norms of both academia and fandom.

In my experience as a fan, the mutual conflict between fans and scholars is less pronounced now than what Hills described in 2002. However, my own experience as a scholar-fan resonates with Matt Hills' contention that this is a difficult position to occupy, as it requires maintaining the respect of both the academic and fandom worlds, which can have opposing

perspectives and subjectivities. In this work, I approach fandom as a scholar, applying scholarly methods and academic theories to two fandoms. However, I also approach this work as a fan: My sampling decisions, communications with fans, and understandings of the texts that I examine are rooted in my own extensive experiences in these and other fandoms. I believe that my own knowledge and understanding of fandom as a fan is a key component to the success of this project.

Research Contributions

As this chapter shows, there is a rich history of scholarship surrounding fans, fandom, and fanfiction. Different approaches toward studying fanfiction have been used over the decades. However, very little research has studied the topic of asexuality in fanfiction. Lýsa Westberg Gabriel's research shows that asexuality can be viewed through the lens of bodily autonomy, but other possibilities remain. From both a literary and critical perspective, what does it mean for a character to be depicted as asexual in fanfiction? What oppositional/resistant readings of the original texts can be seen in asexual fanfiction and under what circumstances is asexual fanfiction *not* subversive or oppositional in relation to the source text or to hegemonic views of sexuality in society? These are the open questions that my work takes up.

Chapter 3. Methodology: Sampling and Analysis

In this chapter, I discuss the methodological theory and the methods that I use to study

the presence of asexuality in fanfiction. I first outline the sampling plan that I used to draw my

sample of 100 fanfiction stories. I then discuss the content analysis and discourse analysis

methods that I employed in my research and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of these

methods, showing that these methods are appropriate tools with which to study my topic.

Sampling Plan

The sample consists of 100 total fanfiction stories ("fics"), 50 from the Iron Man fandom

and 50 from the Sherlock Holmes fandom. All fics were selected from two public websites:

fanfiction.net (also known as FF.net) and archiveofourown.org (also known as AO3). These

websites are both well-known in fandom circles. Fics are also published on a number of other

websites, such as LiveJournal.com, tumblr.com and fandom-specific archive sites, but usually in

smaller quantities. In addition, appropriate tagging or search functions are often lacking on these

other websites, making it extremely difficult to access fic that contains a specific trope, such as

an asexual character. Research on fanfiction by necessity is often limited to fic found on two or

three sites (see Fathallah, 2018). For this study, therefore, I have elected to study only fic that is

found on FF.net and AO3. Both FF.net and AO3 have search functions and use tagging systems

to indicate which characters are present in a fic. AO3 also allows authors to add 'tags' to a fic to

indicate a wide variety of themes, including the presence of an asexual character. FF.net does not

have extensive tagging functionality, but authors do commonly provide a summary for their

story. FF.net's search function allows for the identification of summaries or titles that include words such as "asexual" or "asexuality".

In order to be included in the sample, each fic had to meet the following criteria. It must contain Sherlock Holmes or Tony Stark as a main character. It must depict this character as asexual, whether this is indicated by tagging the character as such or by describing the character as asexual in the summary or text. It must have a word count of at least 1000 (so that the work has enough depth and complexity) but no more than 50,000 words (for the sake of feasibility). It must be marked as "completed" by the author. Finally, it must be publicly available, as opposed to available only to registered users.

Selection Procedures

Due to the differing characteristics of the two fandoms, I used a slightly different approach for each fandom. Both approaches result in a random sample of all eligible fic. In order to select 50 fics that contain an asexual depiction of Sherlock Holmes, I completed the following steps.

1. I identified all fic on FF.net that contained the keyword 'asexual' or 'asexuality' in its summary or text, included the character Sherlock Holmes, and was marked completed.

2. I identified all fic on AO3 that was tagged 'asexual', 'asexuality' or 'asexual character', tagged 'Sherlock Holmes', marked completed, and had between 1,000 and 50,000 words.

3. A total of 85 fics on FF.net met the criteria, as well as 607 fics on AO3, for a total of 692 fics. Using a random number generator, I selected 50 fics.

4. For each of the 50 fics, I checked whether any eligibility criteria were violated, as not all criteria could be addressed directly by the search functions on the two websites. 12 fics

were removed, for the following reasons: the 'asexual' tag or description referred to another character rather than to Sherlock, the fic was based on the Sherlock Holmes novels rather than the 2010 TV series, the fic did not meet word count limits (on FF.net, only an upper *or* lower word count limit can be set in a search), or the fic was available only to registered members. The 12 fics were replaced by new randomly generated fics. Of the replacements, 2 did not meet criteria and were replaced again, until a total sample of 50 fics that met all eligibility criteria was identified.

For the selection of Tony Stark fic, I altered the procedure slightly. Because the Iron Man movies are part of the much larger Marvel Cinematic Universe, it is very common for Tony Stark to be a minor character in a fic. I anticipated that a sizable percentage of fics that turned up in an FF.net or AO3 search would not meet the criteria. Therefore, I reversed the order of drawing the random sample and checking fic for eligibility criteria:

1. I identified all fic on FF.net that contained the keyword 'asexual' or 'asexuality' in its summary or text, included the character Tony Stark, and was marked completed.

2. I identified all fic on AO3 that was tagged 'asexual', 'asexuality' or 'asexual character', tagged 'Tony Stark', marked completed, and had between 1,000 and 50,000 words.

3. A total of 306 fics on AO3 and 10 fics on FF.net met the search criteria. I then examined the tags and summaries of each fic to confirm that Tony Stark was a main character, and that the 'asexual' tag or description applied to Tony Stark as opposed to another character. In one case, though the fic was labeled "asexual", the character was described as aromantic rather than asexual; because aromanticism is closely linked to asexuality,

the fic remained of interest and was retained in the sample (for more on aromanticism,

see Chapter 5). A total of 61 fics met the eligibility criteria.

4. Using a random number generator, I selected 50 of the 61 fics.

For both fandoms, I downloaded all 50 fics in pdf or epub format, in order to preserve any fic

that might be deleted after the search was complete.

Author Permissions

In all cases, the works selected were in the public domain; works available only to

registered users were excluded from the sample. This means that, according to Canadian

Tricouncil research ethics guidelines, permission from the author is not required in order to

include the works in my analysis. However, in fanwriting circles, fanfiction is often considered

to be semi-private, and many authors purposely choose not to promote their work outside of fan

circles and strive to retain anonymity. Therefore, it is considered the standard in fanfiction

research to contact authors and provide them with an opportunity to decline to have their work

used in fanfiction research (see e.g. Fathallah, 2018). The Organization for Transformative

Works, which publishes the fanfiction-focused journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*,

"strongly recommends that permission be obtained from the creator of any fan work" cited in

research (OTW, 2020).

Therefore, I contacted the authors of all works in the sample through the review/comment

systems of FanFiction.Net and Archiveofourown.net. I informed the authors that their fic was

included in my sample, but that it could be removed at their request. I also offered the possibility

of being cited anonymously or having the hyperlink to their work removed in the reference list.

Five authors, accounting for six stories in the sample, declined the use of their work. The work of

the authors who refused was removed and replaced with new random selections chosen according to the selection procedure described above.

Content Analysis

The first method of analysis I use is content analysis. Content analysis originated in the 1950s in the field mass media research and aimed to identify "recurring, easily identifiable aspects of text content" (White & Marsh, 2006). Since then, the methodology has developed and broadened into a set of both quantitative and qualitative methods aimed at categorizing and analyzing aspects of a sample of communications, particularly textual communications.

In this research, I use content analysis to develop a categorization system for asexual fanfiction. As White and Marsh describe, categories or analytical constructs in content analysis "may be derived from (1) existing theories or practices; (2) the experience or knowledge of experts; and (3) previous research" (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 27). In addition, content analysis can employ inductive methods, i.e. using the material to interpret which categories are suitable for analyzing and extracting meaning from the texts (Mayring, 2000). Once developed, this category system is then applied deductively, i.e. once the categories are formulated, they are applied to the sample according to the rules of the category system (Mayring, 2000). In Chapter 4, I further discuss how each of these factors influence the creation of my category system and the analysis of the presence of key words and themes. The aim of the content analysis is to provide an overview of the types of stories, plots and themes that are most common in this sample of asexual fanfiction, to create a framework through which the sample can be interpreted in a discourse analysis.

Discourse Analysis

Similar to content analysis, discourse analysis can refer to a multitude of related approaches to studying texts. Discourse can be defined as "a web of meanings, ideas, interactions and practices that are expressed or represented in texts (spoken and written language, gesture, and visual imagery), within institutional and everyday settings" (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 129). Fanfiction functions as such a web of meanings and ideas, because it is a regulated and transformative set of interconnected texts that are also related to their source texts such as movies and books (Coppa, 2017). In fanfic in particular, visual statements from a TV show or movie can be repeated textually and thus be consolidated (Fathallah, 2018). The possibilities within a discourse are defined by governing statements, from which other statements within the discourse branch out. In the study of fanfic, source texts (in the case of this paper, the TV show *Sherlock* and the *Iron Man* movies) often operate as governing statements, which are acted upon by consolidating or contrasting statements in fic. When it comes to asexuality, other texts or related discourses such as activist discourses on asexuality can also function as governing statements within the discourse of asexual fanfiction.

A number of approaches have emerged in the 20th century to study discourses and their relationships to subjectivity, ideology, knowledge and power. Kathy Bischoping and Amber Gazso (2016) identify three strains of discourse analysis: Foucauldian discourse analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, and garden-variety discourse analysis, with the latter consisting of a broad set of approaches that nonetheless all share some commonalities that mark them as being discourse analyses. The approach to discourse analysis that I take in my work draws from multiple sources, as I discuss below.

Foucault's influential research methods include the approach of archaeology, a method to study the history of ideas (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016), as well as the method of genealogy, which I have already discussed in Chapter 1. In Foucauldian discourse analysis, a key focus is on power-knowledge or the co-constitution of power and knowledge through discourse. This approach to studying discourse can be seen in much of Foucault's work on sexuality, such as his influential work *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (Foucault, 1976/1990). In Foucault's approach, power is primarily seen as relational and an ever-transformative force that can create, constrain and change situations (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016). Foucault's work focuses on how humans are made into subjects within discourses. Foucauldian discourse analysis can show how discourses "constrain or enable what it is possible to say" (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 139).

A second approach to discourse is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This form of discourse analysis is more explicitly political, focused on critiquing and changing societal conditions of injustice and inequality (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016). An important founder of CDA is Norman Fairclough, who studied how texts relate to social structures. He argues that texts can be "invested" with ideology, even when they are not ideological or intended to be ideological (Fairclough, 1993, p. 59-60). In the case of asexual fanfiction, this means that these stories can be studied to identify ideological notions about asexuality, even when the texts were not written with the purpose of communicating ideologically about asexuality.

Even when not associated with Foucault or CDA, discourse analysis studies follow a number of common features that are also apparent in my work. Most importantly, a core strategy for many discourse analysis studies is to explore how discourses shape and are shaped by social interactions and institutions, as well as to explore how discourses represent and/or shape social identities (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016). This is particularly important for studying a discourse of

asexuality. As an underrepresented and often unrecognized group, asexuals may find themselves excluded from many mainstream discourses about sexuality. This makes salient the ability of asexuals to shape a discourse about themselves in fanfiction or, conversely, the ability of an asexual fanfiction discourse to shape how asexual readers and writers understand themselves.

A similar approach to discursive analysis of fanfiction can be seen in the work of Judith May Fathallah, who studies masculinity, power and authorship in fanfiction (Fathallah, 2018). Fathallah refers to the concepts she studies in fanfiction as "discursive formations" in line with the work of Foucault, as well as Edward Said's work on Orientalism. She studies these discursive formations by analyzing how concepts are described, defined, and referred to in fic, seeking "the regularities and boundaries" of these discursive formations (Fathallah, 2018, p. 35).

In summary, my approach to discourse analysis aims to identify how asexuality is constructed as a "discursive formation" within my sample of fanfiction. In my approach, I examine the regularities and boundaries in the texts, identifying which types of statements are repeated across stories to form the core discursive construct of asexuality, and which statements are less common or conflict with the core, thus forming the boundaries of the discursive formation. I also consider whose knowledge and experiences are reflected in the text, connecting the fanfiction discourse on asexuality with the other contemporary asexuality discourses I identified in Chapter 1.

Chapter 4. Content Analysis

This research is based on a content analysis of the sample of 50 Iron Man fics and 50 Sherlock

Holmes fics. In this chapter, I provide a description of the sample and analyze the presence of

key words and themes in the stories. I also discuss the development of my own categorization

system for the asexual fanfiction in this sample. By grouping common themes and storylines

through this system, I begin to make evident the commonalities and differences between

Sherlock Holmes and Tony Stark as asexual characters. This analysis shows that asexual stories

follow a number of common patterns and themes, which highlight the importance of romantic

relationships, personal realization and coming out for asexual characters.

The Sample

Source and Publication Year

As described in Chapter 3, more fics tagged/containing asexuality are present on AO3 than

than on FF.Net. As a result, this disparity is also visible in the randomly selected sample. Of the

100 fics, 7 were from FF.Net and the other 93 were from AO3. The publication years of the

stories ranged from 2010 to 2020 and were roughly evenly distributed across the decade.
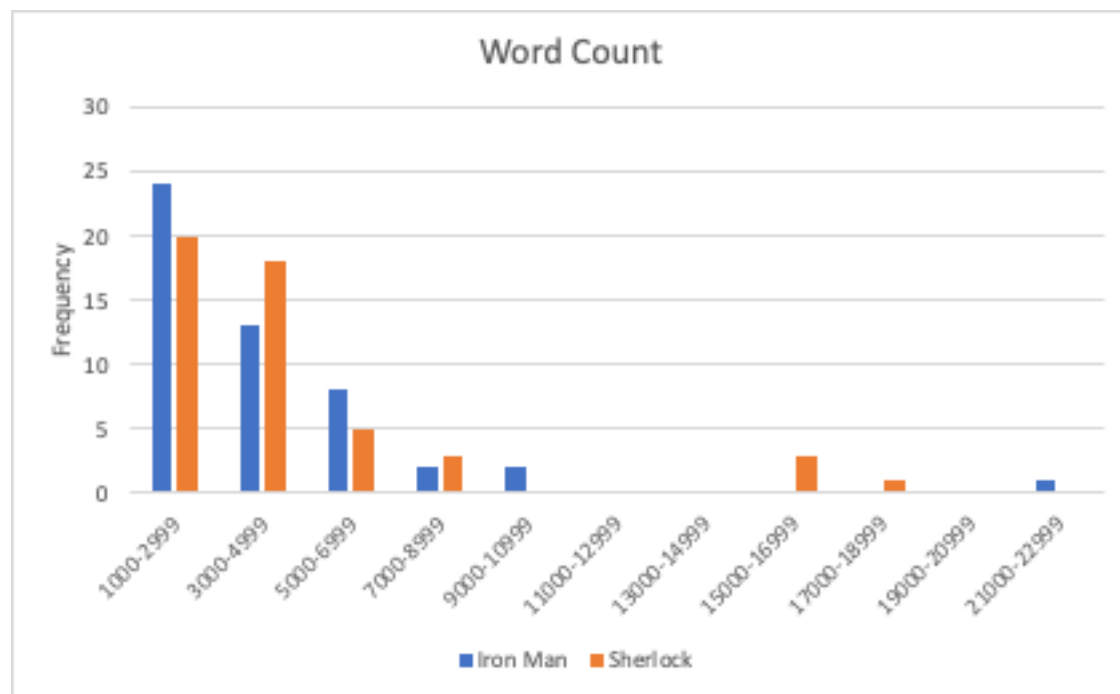
Word Count

The inclusion criteria held that a fic had to be between 1000 and 50,000 words to qualify

for the sample, which is long enough to contain relevant information, but short enough to keep

the project manageable. In total, the sample consists of 421,100 words, roughly evenly spread

across the two fandoms: 207,668 in the Iron Man fics, and 213,432 in the Sherlock fics. The

word counts of the fics in both halves of the sample are unevenly and nonnormally distributed (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Distribution of Word Counts in Sample, Split by Fandom.

The majority of fics have a word count between 1000 and 5000 words, a smaller subset of the sample having a word count between 5000 and 11,000 words, and fewer than five fics in each half of the sample having more than 15,000 words. No fic in the total sample was longer than 22,000 words. Thus, having excluded fics over 50,000 words (novel-length) from consideration, the resulting sample consists primarily of short stories, with only a few fics of what can be considered novella length. This may be due to factors related to asexual characters (i.e. there may be reasons that asexual characters tend to appear only in short stories). However, a prior analysis of word counts on AO3 by a user has shown that short fics are more common on AO3 in general (toastystats, 2013). In addition, word count is related to content rating. Stories that are rated Explicit—for sexual content or graphic violence—are more likely to have high

word counts (toastystats, 2013). These stories are less common in my sample (see below). Given this, it is plausible that the word count distribution in the sample reflects general trends on AO3—and FF.Net, although no statistical information on word counts on that site is available— as a whole, rather than having implications for asexual fanfiction in particular.

Ratings

Both AO3 and FF.net employ a rating system to indicate the appropriate audience for a fic, similar to the systems used to rate movies or TV series. Fics are rated by their authors when they are posted to either site. Although the two websites use slightly different terminology, the systems and processes are very similar. Of the 100 fics in the total sample, 27 were rated K, K+ or G, indicating that the content is suitable for all or most audiences (OTW, 2020); 53 fics were rated T, for Teen and up audiences, meaning the content may be inappropriate for audiences under 13; 3 fics were rated M, for Mature, which indicates that adult themes such as sex or violence are present but not highly explicitly described; 9 fics were rated E, meaning explicit adult themes such as porn or graphic violence are present in the work (OTW, 2020). Lastly, 8 works were marked as Not Rated, a category available on AO3 for authors who do not wish to specify their rating (OTW, 2020).

M or E ratings can sometimes be given due to the presence of death or violence rather than sex/pornography; however, in this sample, M or E ratings directly corresponded with the presence of pornography/sex. The ratings used in each of the two fandoms can be found in Table 1. As this table shows, more fics were rated M or E in the Sherlock fandom than in the Iron Man fandom. The statistical significance of this difference was tested by grouping fics into Adult (M

or E) or Non-Adult (K, K+, G, T) ratings (see Table 2) and performing Fisher's Exact test at α = .05.

Table 1

Frequency of use for rating categories, split by fandom

Rating	Fandom		
	Sherlock	Iron Man	Total
K, K+, G	18	9	27
T	21	32	53
M	3	0	3
E	7	2	9
Not Rated	1	7	8

This test has good reliability for many types of samples, including small samples, when testing 2x2 tables (Andrés & Tejedor, 1995). The test showed that adult-rated fics about asexual characters are more common in the Sherlock fandom than in the Iron Man fandom, $p = .028$. The analysis in Chapter 8 discusses some possible explanations.

Table 2

Simplified rating categories, split by fandom

Rating	Fandom		
	Sherlock	Iron Man	Total
Non-Adult	37	48	85
Adult	13	2	15

Categorizing Asexual Fanfiction

In order to examine what kinds of storytelling are prevalent in asexual fanfiction, I developed a categorization system. To do so, I drew from framing theory, literary theory on common plots, and a previous categorization system for asexual fanfiction developed by Lýsa Westberg Gabriel (2018).

According to Kirk Hallahan (1999), framing theory examines how reality is socially constructed through frameworks, which function to shape any message's meaning by including, excluding and emphasizing different attributes of a situation. Frames aid in conveying specific meanings to an audience "by shaping the inferences that individuals make about the message" (Hallahan, 1999, p. 207). As Hallahan notes, framing in storytelling is one of the most complex kinds of framing, because it "involves (a) selecting key themes or ideas that are the focus of the message and (b) incorporating a variety of storytelling or narrative techniques that support that theme" (Hallahan, 1999, p. 208). As a starting point for developing a system to categorize asexual fanfiction in a meaningful way, then, the question from a framing perspective is: What key themes or ideas are being conveyed about asexuality in this story?

Besides framing, plot types can also aid in developing a typology. Approaching literature and storytelling from a Jungian perspective, Christopher Booker (2004) identified seven basic plots that he believes encompass all storytelling. These types include The Quest, in which the protagonist must acquire an object or travel to a location; Overcoming The Monster, in which the protagonist sets out to defeat an antagonistic force; and the Rebirth, in which an outside event forces the main character to change. Some plot types, such as the Voyage And Return, are not particularly likely to appear in asexual fanfiction and indeed are not recognizable in any stories

in my sample. However, the Rebirth plot in particular lends itself to telling stories about coming out or overcoming adversity related to one's (a)sexual experiences.

In using plot as a main driver to analyzing fanfiction, however, it is worth noting that many fics, especially short fics, often have very little of what could be termed 'plot' at all. This is also true of a substantial portion of my sample. Rather than using storylines to portray changing circumstances or changes within the protagonist, some of these short works of fanfiction could more accurately be seen as character studies, in which a series of scenes is used to explore a static situation or character. In other cases, fics encompass a single scene or a small collection of scenes in which the primary motivation is to evoke a specific feeling in the reader. On fanfiction sites such as AO3, fic is often tagged with a genre that refers primarily to this intended emotion, such as "Fluff" for stories that evoke warm, fuzzy feelings, or "Angst" for evoking anxiety, worry and compassion for the main character. The genre "Hurt/comfort" combines "Angst" and "Fluff" by initially putting a main character in emotionally or physically painful situations. Afterwards, a second character provides the protagonist—and by extension, the reader—with comfort to relieve the pain. Such emotion-specific genres show that fanfiction often primarily serves the purpose of providing an emotional experience to its reader. A plot *can* serve as a convenient vessel for this, but may not be a requirement. This observation is echoed by Jennifer Barnes (2015), who notes that fanfiction genres aimed at delivering a single emotion, such as angst or fluff, "may or may not include much of a plot at all" (p. 76). Thus, in creating a category system for my sample, I took into account the notion of the seven basic plots, most notably the Rebirth plot, while also accounting for the fanfiction-specific genres to which many of the fics in my sample belong.

Lastly, in determining my categorization system, I took into account previous typologies of fanfiction. Several researchers have previously designed and used category systems for fanfiction as an analytical tool, developing systems that best answered to the research goals at hand. In a thesis exploring *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fanfiction through typology, Marilda Oviedo (2007) designed a typology that mixes categories pertaining to content and relationships with categories that are primarily based on storytelling style. For instance, she employs a "slash" category (fic with male/male pairings) and a "Mary Sue" category (fic with original female characters, often author-inserts, who are the hero of the story), as well as categories such as "missing scene" (single scene that has a specific place within the original narrative) and "drabble" (a story that is either less than a page long, or less than 100 or 200 words).

Lýsa Westberg Gabriel (2018), as discussed in Chapter 2, also created a categorization system. Her work pertained to asexual fanfiction, although her primary research focus was on bodily autonomy and consent within asexual fanfiction. Westberg Gabriel's sample differs from mine in a number of ways: she surveyed any asexual fanfiction rather than selecting specific fandoms, and her sample is older, including fic from the early 2000s, whereas the oldest fic in my sample is from 2010. In her typology, she differentiated between six story types, including *Label-but-no-impact-on-plot* for stories in which asexuality is mentioned but not discussed at length and *Informative* for stories that primarily aim to explain asexuality to the reader. Her analysis focused on bodily autonomy and consent, so her largest category was one named *Body-otherwise-bound,* to identify fanfiction in which the body of an asexual character's partner is confined through incarceration, disability or a restrictive environment. Due to the different focus of my research, I do not replicate all of Westberg Gabriel's categories, but several are useful and thus present in my system as well.

Thus, my categorization system combines frame analysis, views on plot, and prior fanfiction typologies into a system that identifies common story types within my sample of asexual fanfiction. Below, I outline each of the categories. In Table 3, I summarize one sample story that exemplifies each category; in Table 4, I list the totals of each category in both fandoms.

Categories of Asexual Fanfiction

Label Only. This category, similar to the one used by Westberg Gabriel (2018), contains stories that only mention asexuality in the tags and in some cases briefly in the body of the text (e.g. one mention of a character never having sex, without follow-up). In these stories, the presence of asexuality has no bearing on the main plot or side plots, on the characterization of the asexual character, or on their interactions with other characters.

Informative. These stories contain explanations of asexuality delivered by a character or by the narrative. The primary purpose of the story and/or of the presence of asexuality appears to be to convey information about asexuality to the reader. Stories of this type often contain monologues by asexual characters about their asexuality, or dialogue in which one character explains asexuality to a character who stands in for the (presumably) ignorant reader.

Realization/Coming Out. The story's main plot revolves around characters gaining understanding of a character's asexual status. This can occur as the asexual character themself realizes that they are asexual or that a label exists that fits their experience. Alternatively, the understanding is gained by another character, in which case the story follows a coming-out narrative. Usually, the emotional tone of the story moves from negative (unrealized/closeted asexuality) to positive (recognized/open asexuality), although there can be exceptions to this.

Asexual Relationship. In these stories, the main plot—or character/relationship study—revolves around exploring asexuality within relationships. In many stories, asexuality and romance initially appear to be in conflict, as the asexual character presumes that they will be unable to have a successful relationship with the object of their romantic love due to their lack of sexual interest. This conflict can be resolved in a number of ways in this story type. In about half of these stories, the romantic interest chooses to renounce sex for their asexual partner—what I refer to as the *Sex Renounced* subtype. In the remainder, the conflict is resolved when the asexual character discovers that, like them, their lover is not interested in sex, either in general or with the asexual character in particular—the *Both Uninterested* subtype. This may be because the other character is also asexual, because the other character is otherwise not sexually attracted to the character (e.g. asexual Sherlock paired with straight John Watson), or in relation to other reasons such as trauma.

Asexual Sex. Stories in this category focus on exploring sexual situations featuring the asexual character. Many stories make references to past or present sex had by asexual characters, but in order to fit this category, sex must be a main theme in the story, whether explicitly described or not. In most cases, the sexual situations are positive for the asexual character; these stories are often pornographic in nature. However, this category also includes stories in which the asexual character experiences rape, as well as stories in which the character consents to sex, but still experiences it negatively.

Subversive. Similar to Westberg Gabriel's (2018) categorization, the final category involves fic that subverts common asexuality tropes, for instance by exploring trauma as a cause of asexuality, by depicting 'queerplatonic' or otherwise subversive forms of relationships, or by exploring nuances in asexual concepts, such as aromanticism. A number of stories in this

category focus on mentoring relationships between asexual characters who are not romantically involved, such as an adult asexual character talking to a teenaged asexual character about whether to come out as asexual. To some extent, the *Subversive* category can be seen as a group of stories that do not fit in the other groups; however, I believe this category is more than merely a "catch-all" category, but instead represents a kind of fic and fic authors who choose to play with common tropes and themes in unusual ways.

Overlap Between Categories

The categories are not mutually exclusive. For instance, a story in which a character comes out as asexual and explains the asexuality to the recipient of their coming out, may fit both the *Informative* and *Realization/Coming Out* categories. Likewise, a story may contain both an asexual relationship and asexual sex. I judged whether both categories applied in equal measure, or if one category was substantially more central to the story. When one category was central, only that category was noted. For instance, in *Fearless* (orphan_account, 2015a), Tony slowly develops a relationship with Steve. When a sexual situation first presents itself, he comes out as asexual; however, his asexuality is explored only in the context of the relationship and the story does not delve into any feelings or themes surrounding coming out. Therefore, the story was sorted only into *Asexual Relationship* and not into *Realization/Coming Out.*

However, other stories did fit two categories in equal measure. For instance, Marvelgeek42's *Good according to (y)our standards* is a collection of five scenes in which Tony comes out as asexual to close friends through a letter; the story contains themes such as the importance of realizing one's asexuality and the positive impact of coming out (*Realization/Coming Out*) and also appears primarily concerned with educating the readers about

these and other asexual themes (*Informative*). This story was sorted into both categories. Other stories also fit two categories, such as *In The Body* (aceofhearts61, 2012) and *Hands That Bleed* (cleflink, 2013), which were both pornographic works in the *Sherlock* fandom that also mentioned (in tags or in text) that Sherlock is asexual, and were therefore sorted into *Asexual Sex* and *Label-Only*. In total, 12 stories fit two categories; therefore, the total of the category counts in Table 4 is 112.

Table 3

Synopses of One Sample Fic Per Category

Category	Author and Title	Synopsis
Label Only	jedibunny (2012), *His Last Case*	John Watson and Sherlock work a case after learning that John will be redeployed to Afghanistan. Tension between them rises, until Sherlock confesses his love and they become a couple just prior to John's departure. Asexuality is mentioned only in the tags.
Informative	TenSpencerRiedPlease (2016), *Infamous*	Tony has an argument with fellow superhero Bucky Barnes about what asexuality is. During their long fight, Tony has multiple extended monologues in which he speaks about his asexual experiences and definitions of asexuality.
Realization/Coming Out	Miniongrin (2014), *I Want You To Love Me (i want you to leave me)*	Tony struggles with feeling different and broken from adolescence into adulthood. He breaks up with his long-term partner due to his aversion to sex. When he learns about asexuality at a Pride parade, he is relieved and adopts the label for himself.
Asexual Relationship	mresundance (2010), *Unusual Symmetry*	Sherlock and John are romantically involved. The story contrasts their relationship, in which John has agreed to forego sex so Sherlock can be himself, with previous partnerships in which Sherlock was pressured to have sex.

Asexual Sex	MiladyPheonix (2019b), *What He Made Of Me*	This pornographic work focuses on sex and kink between John Watson and Sherlock. Sherlock is not interested in sex and does not experience arousal, but he enjoys bringing pleasure to John, who is the main focus when they have sex.
Subversive	SailorChibi (2018), *Chocolate Cake*	Tony is approached by younger superhero Peter Parker, who is distressed because he is not interested in girls (or boys). Tony suggests he might be asexual, which greatly relieves Peter's distress.

Results of the Category Analysis

Table 4 shows how often each category occurred within each fandom. *Informative* was the least common category, whereas *Asexual Relationship* was the most common. Approximately one in five fics (18) were *Label-Only*, indicating that these fics engaged in a fairly passive form of representation: naming a character as asexual without necessarily exploring this topic. However, this means that the vast majority of fics (82) did not fit this category and did contain at least some in-depth exploration of asexuality and that the presence of asexuality had at least some impact on the plot. One fifth of the fics (22) contained a *Realization/Coming Out* story arc, and about a third (34) mostly focused on asexual characters in relationships.

Table 4

Frequency of Categories, by Fandom.

Category	Fandom		
	Sherlock	Iron Man	Total
Label-Only	17	1	18
Informative	1	8	9
Realization/Coming Out	4	18	22
Asexual Relationship	13	21	34
Asexual Sex	9	4	13
Subversive	9	7	16

The category *Subversive* applied to 16 fics; thus, a fairly substantial number of the stories deviated from common plot types or turned these on their head in some way. These stories are

discussed throughout the remaining results chapters (Chapters 5-8), as they often provide valuable information about the diversity of perspectives on asexuality that are present in fanfiction. *Asexual Sex* was a main feature of 13 stories, which are discussed in detail in Chapter 8. Lastly, the least common category was *Informative*, which applied to nine stories. The function and form of *Informative* stories is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Differences Between the Fandoms

As Table 4 shows, some categories were more prevalent in one fandom than in the other. The *Label-Only* category applied to a third of the Sherlock sample (17 fics), while appearing only once in the Iron Man sample. Thus, it was much more common for Sherlock to be labeled as asexual without an exploration of what this might mean to a character, a plot, or the themes of a story. I believe that this is due to a difference in reportability. According to Kathy Bischoping and Amber Gazso (2016), a story's reportability or tellability refers to its newsworthiness. A good story is reportable, meaning that its author can reasonably defend the question "why are you telling that?" (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 55). If something is not noteworthy or interesting, the principle of reportability is violated. In this case, asexuality may be reportable for Tony Stark, but not for Sherlock. Sherlock Holmes already displays little interest in sex and romance in the series *Sherlock*. For him, being asexual may not be that notable, and thus not reportable. Tony Stark, on the other hand, is a notorious playboy and womanizer in his movie appearances, making it unexpected and noteworthy for him to be asexual. The only *Iron Man* story that was categorized as *Label-Only* (*This is Me;* Jenndude5, 2016) explored magically-bonded soulmate relationships between Tony and other superheroes and referenced only the fact that Tony had no romantic soulmates, only platonic ones. All other Tony Stark stories contained

substantially more engagement with the notion of Tony as an asexual character, reinforcing that the reportability of Tony's asexuality is much higher than that of Sherlock's.

Realization/Coming Out plotlines were more common among Iron Man fic. This may also stem from the congruence/incongruence dynamic of asexuality with Sherlock's and Iron Man's canonical characterization. Because Sherlock's asexuality is perceived as more congruent with his canon persona, it may not require as much soul-searching, or be as reportable to others, or warrant a coming out. Tony's asexuality, on the other hand, deviates from the way he is canonically perceived, opening the door to coming-out narratives and moments of self-reflection. *Informative* stories occurred only once in the *Sherlock* sample, but eight times in the *Iron Man* sample. This may again be driven by the incongruence of Tony's asexuality with his canon persona prompting the need for explanation. It may also be due to other differences between the fandoms and who becomes a fanfiction author in each fandom. It should also be noted that four stories by one author (TenSpencerRiedPlease) were in the sample, the largest single-author contribution, and each of these four stories was an *Iron Man* story in the *Informative* category. This author has had a relatively large influence on the contents of this category, and by extension, on what a reader may encounter if they search for fic about an asexual version of Tony. As I show in more detail in Chapter 5, *Informative* stories can tie into online discourses about the nature and meaning of asexuality, which take place on Tumblr and other social media sites. These online discourses may be more closely followed by members of one fandom than another.

As I discussed above in the section on Ratings, the presence of *Asexual Sex* is more common in Sherlock fic; as mentioned, I discuss this dynamic at length in Chapter 8.

Presence of Key Words and Themes

In addition to the above categorization, I screened works for the presence or absence of several common tropes and descriptors of asexual characters that may appear across story types, in order to further describe trends and commonalities in the sample.

Use of "Asexual"

First, I analyzed how many stories used the word "asexual" or "ace" to describe the asexual character in the text. Although it had been an inclusion criterion for stories to use the word "asexual" or "asexuality" in their tags or story description, many stories did not use the word asexual in the text. In some cases, there was no indication in the text that the character had a sexual difference (common in *Label-Only* stories). In other cases, the asexuality was described in other terms, such as only describing behavior and emotions toward sex, without using a label for the character. As shown in Table 5, this was far more common in the Sherlock fandom than in the Iron Man fandom.

Table 5

Use of the Word "Asexual" or "Ace" in the Text of the Story, by Fandom.

Does text use "asexual" or "ace"?	Fandom		
	Sherlock	Iron Man	Total
Yes	14	40	54
No	36	10	46

In fact, a large majority of Sherlock fics never used the word "asexual" or "ace" in the text, while a large majority of Iron Man fics did. This difference was statistically significant, Fisher's exact $p < .001$. Sherlock is thus frequently labeled "asexual" by fic authors in their tags, but the stories themselves discuss asexual themes without having the character use such labels.

Use of "Broken" and "Freak"

Similar to "Asexual", I registered how many works in each fandom used the term "broken" or "freak" to describe asexuality. In my observation, the word "broken" is often used by asexual people to describe pre-realized asexuality (e.g. "before I knew what asexuality was, I just felt broken") in online asexual communities, particularly on blogging platform Tumblr. During my initial readthrough of the sample, I also noticed the use of the word "freak" and therefore added it to this analysis. When either word was used unrelated to asexuality, such as "broken bone" or in references to Sherlock being a "freak" due to his unusual intelligence, this was not counted.

Table 6

Use of the Word "Broken" to Describe Asexuality, by Fandom.

Does text use "broken"?	Fandom		
	Sherlock	Iron Man	Total
Yes	2	16	18
No	48	34	82

As seen in Table 6, the word "broken" is used in approximately a third of Iron Man fics, usually because Tony describes himself as broken due to his asexuality. By contrast, this word use is far less common in Sherlock fic, appearing in only two stories. This difference is statistically significant, Fisher's exact $p < .001$.

The use of the word "Freak" to describe asexuality is less common, although it does occur in some fics in each fandom (see Table 7). In this case, the difference between the two fandoms was not statistically significant, Fisher's exact $p = .5766$.

Table 7

Use of the Word "Freak" to Describe Asexuality, by Fandom.

Does text use "freak"?	Fandom		
	Sherlock	Iron Man	Total
Yes	6	9	14
No	44	41	86

Adding the use of "broken" and "freak" together, exploring the notion of asexuality as broken or freakish is a fairly common theme in Iron Man fic, but less so in the Sherlock fandom. This may be related to the common presence of Label-Only fics in the Sherlock fandom; asexuality seems more likely to be present without being explored as a theme that may bring pain or feelings of wrongness/non-belonging for the asexual character. For Tony, however, asexuality appears more often to be associated with such feelings of pain, unbelonging, and brokenness. I discuss these feelings and their different portrayals between the two fandoms at length in Chapter 6.

Sex-Positive Attitudes

Last, I analyzed whether each story's asexual character had a sex-positive, sex-neutral or sex-averse attitude. In this case, sex-positive meant one or more of the following: the asexual character indicated that they were open to and more or less enthusiastic about the prospect of having sex; they indicated that they had previously enjoyed sex; they had sex in the story and were a consenting, enthusiastic participant; or they otherwise claimed to have or were described as having a positive attitude toward engaging in sexual behaviour despite being asexual. A sex-negative attitude was present when the asexual character responded to sex or the idea of having sex with disgust, fear, rejection or other negative emotions or attitudes. Sex-neutral attitudes most often consisted of seeing sex as boring, unnecessary or pointless, but not necessarily pleasant or unpleasant.

However, in many stories, the asexual character indicated that they were not open to having sex, but it was difficult to distinguish between a sex-neutral attitude (e.g. "sex is boring") and a sex-negative attitude (e.g. "sex is disgusting"). Therefore, in Table 8, I have split the sample into those fics that display a clear sex-positive attitudes, those that display an attitude to sex that is not positive (i.e. neutral or negative) and those that display no clear attitude toward sex at all. The latter are usually Label-Only stories, which do not allow for the determination of attitudes towards sex because neither asexuality nor sex is discussed in the story.

As Table 8 shows, sex-positive attitudes are not particularly common in the sample. However, it is noteworthy that sex-positive attitudes do occur, appearing in seven Sherlock fics and nine Iron Man fics. Thus, multiple authors portray asexual characters who "get something" out of sex, whether it is their own form of asexual/sexual pleasure, enjoyment at a partner's pleasure, or other benefits to sex that make it actively desirable despite a character's asexuality.

This theme is explored more in Chapter 8, in which I analyze when and under what circumstances asexual characters are portrayed as having sex.

Table 8

Frequency of Sex-Positive Attitudes

Sex-positive attitude	Fandom		
	Sherlock	Iron Man	Total
Yes	7	9	14
No	28	40	69
Unclear	15	1	17

Conclusion

In this chapter, I used content analysis to identify commonalities and themes in my sample. Analysis of the stories' content ratings showed that explicit content was more common in the Sherlock fandom. I then discussed the categorization system I developed. This system showed that about a fifth of the fics in the sample did not engage deeply with asexual themes. However, the majority of the stories do engage with asexuality as a story theme, and these stories fit a number of common patterns: focusing on asexual relationships or sex, telling coming out narratives and narratives of sexual self-realization, or providing information to the reader. Another group of fanfiction did not fit these patterns, but instead broke with them in unexpected ways, such as telling stories of mentorship, exploring causal pathways to asexuality, or exploring the nuances of asexuality vs. aromanticism. Each of these categories is discussed further in the coming chapters. I also analyzed the presence of a number of themes and words in the sample,

such as the use of "asexual", which happens in the text of about half the stories, and the presence of the words "broken" and "freak" to describe asexuality. Lastly, I analyzed the presence of sex-positive attitudes. This topic is discussed further in Chapter 8.

This content analysis has shown that asexual fanfiction can follow a number of predictable patterns, although each story remains unique and deviations or subversions of the patterns are possible. Asexual characters often go through arcs of self-discovery and/or confession, and they frequently engage in complex romantic relationships with other characters. In the coming chapters, I identify the main features and nuances of these story arcs. Although I have already sketched out some common story patterns in this chapter, in the next chapter I begin with the question: What exactly is asexuality, according to this sample of fanfiction? And when is asexuality positively or negatively experienced by those it affects?

Chapter 5. Defining Asexuality

"He has never heard the term 'asexual' before, but it's obvious what it means"

Of Like Minds, inkspot_fox (2011)

In this chapter, I use discourse analysis to examine the definitions of asexuality that are present in the sample, to show how asexuality is discursively constructed within asexual fanfiction. In particular, I examined whether the definition of asexuality is discursively fixed, leading to many similar statements around asexuality, or whether variety or contradictions are apparent in the discourse. I also noted what the boundaries of the discursive construct of asexuality are with respect to the things that are said *not* to be part of asexuality and thereby define asexuality by virtue of their exclusion. Through this analysis, I argue that asexuality is indeed a partly fluid concept, with at least two definitions appearing repeatedly in the discourse of asexual fanfiction. I also show that asexuality is frequently contrasted with aromanticism, opening up possibilities for asexual subjects to experience romantic love.

In order to examine how asexuality is defined and circumscribed in the discourse formed by asexual fanfiction, I collected several kinds of discursive statements from the sample of 100 stories. First, I examined specific definitions, often in sentences such as "asexuality means…" or "asexuality is…". Such sentences were particularly common in stories of the *Informative* type, which set out to communicate information about asexuality to the reader. However, they also occur in other story types, particularly in the *Realization/Coming Out* category. In these types of stories, a definition of asexuality is often given in the process of realizing one is asexual—for instance, when the character looks up asexuality or is told about asexuality by someone else—or

in the process of coming out, because the coming-out recipient does not know enough about asexuality.

Second, I included quotes and descriptions that were not literal definitions but were still given within the context of explanations of what constitutes asexuality. In *Label-Only* fics, where asexuality had no influence on the plot, sometimes there was one sentence that indicated a sexual difference; this sentence was then taken to be that fic's definition or description of asexuality. In examining definitions or descriptions of asexuality, I found two main approaches to defining asexuality: a lack of sexual attraction and a lack of interest in sex. Although these two may appear at first to be highly similar, they have different implications, so I will describe them in turn.

Lack of Sexual Attraction

The most common way asexuality was initially defined in multiple stories was by virtue of a lack of sexual attraction. This definition is used by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN, 2020e), and it was echoed in multiple stories. "I'm asexual. I don't feel sexual attraction," says Tony to his date, Steve, in *Fearless* (orphan_account, 2015a). Similarly, in *Infamous* (TenSpencerRiedPlease, 2016), Tony says that "feeling or not feeling sexual attraction" is the crux of his sexual difference from other people. In SmartKIN (2017)'s story *Round and Around I Go*, Tony discusses asexuality with younger superhero Peter Parker, who worries that he's not interested in sex. Tony explains to him what asexuality is:

> Asexuality […] it's a lack of sexual attraction. A majority of people, as you know, is
>
> attracted to the opposite sex, some to their own, some to both, et cetera. But there are
>
> other people, like perhaps you, like me, who do not experience sexual attraction at all,

it's-this is a very rudimentary explanation, mind you, it's more complex than that, but

you can read up on it later, it's a lot to take in at first… (SmartKIN, 2017).

This explanation hints at additional aspects of asexuality through Tony's assertion that "it's more complex than that", but like many other stories, its definition of asexuality begins with a lack of sexual attraction.

Although explicit definitions and discussions of asexuality are more common in *Iron Man* than *Sherlock* fanfiction, this definition can also be found in *Sherlock* fic: "There's nothing wrong with the lack of sexual attraction. It just means you're asexual", Sherlock's brother tells him in *How Would You Know* (Lothiriel84, 2014). Similarly, in a story that explores Sherlock's relationship to his daughter Joanna and his partner John, asexuality is described as "when you are not attracted to either men nor [sic] woman and only notice their appearance in an [sic] purely objective sense" and "lack of attraction" (tfbl, 2013). In solrosan's *Let your body decide* (2012), Sherlock is asked what asexuality means and answers "I don't experience sexual attraction, to anyone or anything"; in Iwantthatcoat's *Easy* (2013), Sherlock says "I wasn't attracted. To anyone. Drawn to anyone". Other stories put this in slightly broader terms, such as saying that "the man doesn't like anyone. Asexual" (GreenNebulae, 2013). Thus, asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction is the most common starting point as a definition of asexuality; it is seen in both *Iron Man* and *Sherlock* fic. However, this is not the only discourse surrounding asexuality that is present in asexual fanfiction.

Lack of Interest in Sex

A second way asexuality is defined is in relation to an asexual character's approach to sex: having no interest in sex, not getting aroused, or not enjoying sex. This definition occurs in

both *Iron Man* and *Sherlock* stories. For instance, in *The Invisible Army*, Sherlock tells John that

he is "Asexual. […] Without sexual feelings or associations". In other stories, Sherlock is

described as having "no personal interest in sex" and as being "incapable of sexual arousal"

(MiladyPheonix, 2019b); that "sex holds no interest for [him]" (TheMadKatter13, 2017); that he

"has never had any desire for sex" (InTheShadows, 2015); and Sherlock says that "at the best of

time, my interest in sex is vague […] Most of the time it is nonexistent" (mresundance, 2010).

These definitions can also be seen in *Iron Man* fic. For instance, in one story, Tony's fellow

superhero Natasha tells him that he might be "Asexual. I'm no expert on the topic, but basically

you don't want to have sex with anyone, ever" (Angel1972, 2014). In DancingForRain's *Give*

Them What They Want, Tony's asexual realization is spurred by the observation: "I think I might

not be into sex" (DancingForRain, 2015). Thus, in these stories, the asexual character is defined

by not being interested in sex, by not experiencing physical arousal, or by wanting to avoid sex.

Sexual Attraction and Desire for Sex: The Same Phenomenon?

Defining asexuality primarily as not wanting to have sex is less common than defining it

as a lack of sexual attraction. A number of stories also offer both definitions together, implying

that they mean the same thing or are closely related. "No interest in sex with other people, or

rather, not experiencing sexual attraction" is the definition of asexuality that Tony offers in

Never Let Me Go (Iron_Eirlyssa, 2019). In another story, Tony explains to his fellow superhero

and romantic interest Steve that he is asexual by saying "I am not […] attracted to you […]

When I say attraction, Steve, I mean sex, I've never wanted to have sex with anybody."

(the_casual_cheesecake, 2020). These, and several other stories, thus posit the idea that "no

sexual attraction to anyone" and "no interest in having sex" are overlapping concepts, which equally define asexuality.

However, multiple stories offer discursive statements that explicitly define "lack of sexual attraction" as something *separate* from whether the character has a lack of interest or enjoyment in sex. According to this view, an asexual character may experience one, but not the other. In most stories where this occurs, the asexuality is defined by the absence of sexual attraction, and it is then specified that an asexual person, despite lack of attraction, may nonetheless be willing or even actively interested in engaging in sex. For instance, in *I Want You To Love Me (i want you to leave me)* (Miniongrin, 2014), Tony learns about asexuality at a Pride parade and is first given the definition that "asexuals feel no sexual attraction at all"; then, he reads a flyer about asexuality, which discusses the "sliding scale of asexuality, from people who can find sex enjoyable but don't really feel the craving, down to people who are repulsed by the act" (Miniongrin, 2014). Similarly, in *Seeing* (tfbl, 2013), set many years in the future, Sherlock's asexuality is explained by his daughter Joanna. She first defines it as "not attracted to either men nor [sic] woman", and then continues: "A simple misunderstanding? That people whom [sic] are asexual are incapable of feeling any form of sexual desire or arousal. Joanna knows that this might be true for some, but it is not so for her father."

Other stories follow the same pattern. An asexual Tony Stark mentors younger superhero Peter Parker, who may also be asexual, in *Round and Around I Go* (SmartKIN, 2017). Tony says: "The term asexual just defines the group of people someone's attracted to – in this case, no one – it doesn't say anything about what you like to get up to, or what you're feeling". It is perhaps put most angrily by Tony in *Didn't Want to Know* (TenSpencerRiedPlease, 2016). In this story, Tony gets into an argument with fellow superhero Bucky about what asexuality is;

Bucky is not convinced that asexuality is real because Tony has had sex and enjoys it. Finally, Tony exclaims in exasperation: "I have explained to you like fivethousand [sic] times that not feeling sexual attraction doesn't mean you don't like sex for fuck sakes [sic]".

Although some stories blur the lines between sexual attraction and desire for sex, many other stories specifically posit that these are two different phenomena. This raises the question: if lack of sexual attraction is not the same as a lack of interest in sex with someone, what exactly does it mean in this discourse on asexuality to "not be sexually attracted" to anyone? Some stories do offer at least a circumspect way of defining this. For instance, tfbl's line "when you are not attracted to either men nor [sic] woman and only notice their appearance in an [sic] purely objective sense" (2013) suggests that a lack of sexual attraction means that other people's appearance can be seen "objectively", as opposed to sexually. A story by TenSpencerRiedPlease offers a more explicit description when Tony says, "I like orgasms and they're funner [sic] with other people involved, that's why I have sex. Isn't that everyone's reason for having sex? Like you don't just look at people and think 'I wanna fuck 'em'" (TenSpencerRiedPlease, 2015). Thus, sexual attraction seems to be defined roughly as "looking at someone and desiring to have sex with them". This, indeed, does not necessarily preclude enjoying sex. Masturbation, a gay man having sex with a woman, or a straight woman choosing to have sex with a man she does not find particularly attractive, could all be situations in which sexual attraction is absent but where sex can still have enjoyable features. This, then, appears to be the case for these asexual characters as well.

In order to examine this dynamic more closely, I now discuss one story at more length: *Seeing* by tfbl (2013). This story describes Sherlock as someone who does not experience sexual attraction, but still engages in (pleasurable) sex in a way that is representative of the other stories

discussed in the above paragraph. *Seeing* is a roughly 3000-word story from the *Informative* category. It contains no dialogue and is written in close third-person perspective. Although Sherlock does not have children in his canonical depiction, this author has invented his daughter Joanna, born when Sherlock was 23 and now a (young) adult. The story aims to explore how Joanna understands her father's asexuality. Joanna sees Sherlock's asexuality as something positive. She is contrasted in this regard with "people" in general, as well as with Sherlock's brother Mycroft, who apparently does not understand what Sherlock's asexuality means.

In *Seeing*, asexuality is described as "a lack of sexual attraction". Joanna notes that other people assume that this makes her father cold and unfeeling, but she has seen that he is capable of close and loving relationships, such as with her, with John who is his "lover and domestic partner", and with his close friends. Joanna also notes that although people assume asexual people are "incapable" of sexual desire or arousal, "this might be true for some, but it is not so for her father". She describes how he experimented with sex in his twenties (resulting in her birth), and that Sherlock is able to be aroused, "for he has the same nerves and anatomy as the next man". Thus, the story explicitly disavows the idea that Sherlock is asexual because he has a physical difference from non-asexual people, but it does leave open the possibility that this may be true for *other* asexual people: "this might be true for some".

Joanna goes on to note that Sherlock, although capable of arousal and sex, is not highly interested in sex, and that he "was willing to have sex with John but he didn't *desire* it in the way that John did" (emphasis in original). This difference between John and Sherlock was significant enough that Sherlock offered to open up their relationship, so that John could have sex with people who were more actively desirous participants—a suggestion to which "John said no, of course". Although Joanna does not know the details, she notes that "some sort of compromise"

was reached between Sherlock and John, in which Sherlock initiates sex at least some of the time. This compromise satisfies them both.

Thus, in *Seeing* (tfbl, 2013), Sherlock's asexuality is defined by his lack of sexual attraction, which results in low interest in sex and a significant mismatch in sexual desire between Sherlock and a non-asexual partner (John). However, Sherlock is not averse to sex, has had neutral or positive sexual experiences, and occasionally initiates sex with his partner. This story illustrates that the relationship between "no sexual attraction", "no arousal" and "no interest in sex" is a complicated one. The author makes choices about which of these descriptions apply to the asexual character, but also leaves open the possibility that not every asexual person is the same. The idea that asexuality means that one cannot be aroused is painted as a "misunderstanding" even though the text also states that this may be true for other asexual people.

Other aspects of asexuality also remain somewhat vague in this story. Although the story notes that Sherlock *has* been interested in sex, the story nonetheless also claims that Sherlock's asexuality does mean that he is *less* interested in sex than others. This suggests that asexuality can denote a difference in degree rather than in kind, at least in practical terms: not *no* interest in sex, but *less* interest in sex. At the same time, the core definition of asexuality is offered as a definitive and qualitative one: the lack of sexual attraction.

Seeing (tfbl, 2013) is representative of the sample in the sense that many other stories also offer a somewhat confusing picture of what asexuality actually is, despite seeming to offer the very categorical definition of "no sexual attraction". Asexuality is discursively constituted as a complicated phenomenon that can encompass not just a lack of sexual attraction, but also a lack of interest in sex, a reduced interest in sex, an aversion to sex, an enjoyment of sex, an

inability to be aroused or an ability to be aroused but merely less interest in the idea. Even the notion of what exactly it means to "not experience sexual attraction" remains somewhat vague and circumspect. Some stories suggest that sexual attraction means "looking at other people and wanting to sleep with them", whereas others offer no definition at all. It is assumed that the reader understands what sexual attraction entails. This is noteworthy because it is likely that asexual readers are the target audience for at least some of the stories. Asexual people are assumed not to experience sexual attraction—after all, this is how authors define them—but apparently they are expected to understand what this concept means.

Aromanticism: What Asexuality Is Not

In my examination of the sample, I also looked for discursive constructs that were shown *not* to belong to or not to define asexuality. Aromanticism was one concept that emerged in multiple stories that, although related, was distinct from asexuality. Eight stories in the sample— the majority in the *Iron Man* fandom—separated asexuality from aromanticism, offered separate definitions, or used tags for aromanticism in addition to the tag for asexuality, thereby providing information on what separates the two concepts.

As discussed above, definitions or descriptions of asexuality are focused on an absence of sexual attraction/desire and a lack of interest in sex. Aromanticism mirrors this, but with *romantic* attraction or the desire for romantic relationships. "Aromantic people are people who don't feel any kind of romantic attraction towards other people," Tony explains in *Life Moves in Unexpected Ways* by Originalobjecttheorist (2019). A more practical explanation is offered in SailorChibi's *Chocolate Cake*, in which Tony mentors possibly-asexual teenage superhero Peter Parker (Spider-Man). Tony says that he is not only asexual, but aromantic as well: "I'm

aromantic, too. That means I don't get crushes or fall in love with people." (SailorChibi, 2018). In another story by SailorChibi (2017b), a similar definition is offered: "you're aromantic so you're not in love with [him]", Tony speculates to a fellow superhero who is trying to sort out his feelings.

Not all stories that mention aromanticism offer a definition. However, in all cases, aromanticism was contrasted against asexuality. In the only Sherlock story to mention aromanticism, Sherlock "primly" says that "[a]sexual doesn't mean aromantic" (Snow, 2011) when John is surprised to discover that Sherlock has a partner. Although no definition is offered, the interaction indicates that if Sherlock *were* aromantic, not just asexual, then John's surprise would be justified, thus implying that aromantic people do not have partners. Other stories similarly emphasize the contrast between asexuality and aromanticism. In miniongrin's (2014) story where Tony learns about asexuality through flyers at a pride parade (discussed above), the flyer contains "[a]nother section on aromanticism and how it's not the same thing as asexuality, but *can* overlap—but just because a person's asexual it doesn't mean that they don't want or can't be a part of a fulfilling romantic relationship" (miniongrin, 2014). This line offers the same clear delineation between asexuality and aromanticism, as well as the same implied definition of aromanticism. In *Is it real to me? Is it real to you?* by Sabriel (2019), Tony has struggled with his sexual difference and finally looked up "a bunch of fuckin' words" about what might be going on with him: "asexual. I'm that. And aromantic. I don't think I'm that". Several other stories reference being "asexual and aromantic" (SailorChibi, 2018), also known as "aroace, that is aromantic asexual" (Originalobjecttheorist, 2019), or used a tag such as "aromantic character" in addition to the asexuality tag (queenieofaces, 2012; Lothiriel84, 2017).

Although only these eight stories explicitly mention or discuss aromanticism, this reflects a broader trend in the sample. The definitions of asexuality focus on sexual attraction, sexual desire and sex, but not on relationships. Relationships are desired by asexual characters as much as by anyone else, unless the character is also aromantic. Only one fic forms an exception: the *Sherlock* story *Asexual* by GreenNebulae (2013). This short fic is a character study, exploring John Watson's romantic interest in Sherlock. Although John is in love, he knows that Sherlock will never be interested in a relationship or sex because "the man doesn't like anyone. Asexual". The story discusses John's despair at knowing he will never have what he wants due to Sherlock's asexuality. In this story, asexuality *does* preclude the possibility of a romantic relationship, but it forms the notable exception within the sample.

Thus, only one story connects asexuality to a lack of interest in relationships. All other stories in the sample either feature an asexual character who shows at least some interest in relationships, or they introduce the concept of aromanticism to account for a character's lack of romantic desires. Asexuality therefore appears to denote a difference solely in people's sexual lives, not their romantic lives. This stands in contrast with most people's understandings of terms such as homosexuality or heterosexuality, which are assumed to refer to a person's desires when it comes to *both* sex and relationships. This opens up the possibility for a character to be both asexual *and* gay, lesbian, straight or bi, in the sense that Sherlock and Tony Stark in their asexual depictions frequently do form romantic relationships (with other characters of various genders).

Evaluating Definitions of Asexuality

In inkspot_fox's *Of Like Minds* (2011), Sherlock meets the famous young wizard Harry Potter. Using his observational skills, he deduces that Harry is asexual, like Sherlock. When he

tells Harry so, Harry is "speechless". "He has never heard the term 'asexual' before, but it's obvious what it means", the narrative tells its readers (inkspot_fox, 2011). However, throughout this chapter, it has become clear that it is *not* all that obvious what, exactly, asexuality means. Vague and occasionally conflicting definitions and explanations abound throughout the stories in the sample. Despite this, some discursive patterns are clear. The most common way to describe asexuality is as "a lack of sexual attraction": other people do not evoke a desire for sex in the asexual person. In many cases, this means that the asexual person does not seek out or enjoy sex, and sometimes this is even given as the primary feature of asexuality. However, in other cases, the asexual person experiences a lack of sexual attraction but still displays moderate or even high levels of interest in sex. I outline the reasons why asexual characters may engage in sex in Chapter 8, but for now it is important to note that having/wanting sex does not always contradict the presence of asexuality or an asexual identity.

Where do these definitions and descriptions fit into other contemporary understandings of asexuality? For this, I will return to my findings in Chapter 1. In this chapter, I outlined that the Asexuality and Visibility Network (AVEN), along with sexologists and psychologists, tend to characterize asexuality as a sexual orientation defined by a lack of sexual attraction. By contrast, asexuality scholars more often view asexuality as a perspective that encompasses a diversity of experiences, from which it is possible to examine and critique society's approach to sex and sexuality.

Taking these two viewpoints, the overall approach to asexuality in fanfiction seems to align most closely to the first: that of AVEN and sexologists, characterizing asexuality primarily by lack of asexual attraction. Many fics echo viewpoints that are also expressed on AVEN's website, such as that some asexuals have a libido and can enjoy sex, or that asexuals can desire

and have successful romantic relationships with others (AVEN, 2020b). In particular, the notion

of asexuality as distinct from romantic attraction/orientation can be seen on the AVEN website.

In AVEN's FAQ, they describe this as the "Split Attraction Model, which separates sexual

attraction or desire from romantic attraction or desire" (AVEN, 2020b).

Some fics do explore more varied viewpoints, such as asexuality as an aversion to sex or

a lack of desire to act on sexual impulses. However, while asexual scholars are interested in

using asexuality as a lens to explore broader themes of sex and sexuality in society, this impulse

does not seem to be borne out in fanfiction. This is likely due to the character-driven nature of

most fanfiction (see Chapter 2). Because fanfiction is focused on speculations about character,

rather than about world, the definitions of asexuality are focused on what they mean for the

character, rather than the world in which the character lives. Having analyzed how the discourse

of asexual fanfiction defines asexuality and what its discursive boundaries are, I now turn to the

question of the emotional valence of asexuality.

Chapter 6. The Emotional Valence of Asexuality

"Asexual. There was a word for it. There was a word for him. […] The feeling was more satisfying than cocaine had ever been."

Let Your Body Decide, Solrosan (2012)

In this chapter, I identify the different emotional valences that asexuality carries in fanfiction. I answer the question: What negative and positive emotions surround asexuality, and under what circumstances? I first discuss negative emotions and the circumstances under which they are linked to asexuality; after this, I turn to positive emotions. Finally, I identify and discuss the common emotional story arcs in stories of the *Realization/Coming Out* category through close readings of two stories that provide representative examples for the role that positive and negative emotional valence play in asexual fanfiction about Tony and Sherlock. This analysis shows that asexuality discursively produces both strong negative and strong positive emotions, particularly in the context of emotional arcs that appear in *Realization/Coming Out* stories. I argue that these emotional possibilities have implications for asexual advocacy and education.

Negative Emotions: Brokenness, Fear of Rejection, and Frustration

First, I will discuss when the emotional valence of asexuality is negative: that is, when is it associated with unpleasant emotions such as fear/anxiety, shame, or frustration? For this, I analyzed discursive statements in the sample in which asexuality was associated with a negative emotional state. Two sets of negative emotions are common in asexual *Iron Man* fanfiction: a feeling of being broken when the asexual character does not understand or recognize their own

asexuality, and a fear of what others will think. As discussed in Chapter 4, 16 *Iron Man* stories use the word "broken" and 19 use the word "freak" to refer to asexuality. This feeling is experienced by Tony when he does not understand his own sexual difference, leading to feelings of anxiety/fear, alienation, shame, and loneliness. Many stories explore these negative feelings surrounding an unrecognized asexuality. In *Mutually Assured Destruction* (Reioka, 2017), Tony has a panic attack when his new partner initiates sex, leading to a fight and a breakup. When his friend Pepper comes to find him, he tells her "I think I'm broken", and tells her he does not want sex, that this means "there must be something wrong with [him]". He tells her that he attempted to go through with sex: "I was going to do it. Give him what he wanted. And then I chickened out. Just the thought of—I wanted to vomit. That. That's not normal" (Reioka, 2017). Thus, his unrealized asexuality is associated with fear and shame: Tony feels that he is abnormal and broken, and is afraid both of going through with sex, and of telling his partner or friend what he is experiencing. Similarly, in *Attraction* (Shunters, 2017), he grows up feeling different from other kids, and when he hears other teenagers talk about sex, "[h]e thought he was a freak, abnormal, and…broken", suggesting grief, anxiety and shame about his perceived difference. In another story, prior to realizing his asexuality, Tony feels "broken. Worthless" (Marvelgeek42, 2016). Several stories also associate an unrealized state of asexuality with emotions such as confusion (Reioka, 2017; cptxrogers, 2016) and denial (DancingForRain, 2015; orphan_account, 2014).

These frequent assertions of "brokenness" or "wrongness" regarding asexuality suggests that unrecognized asexuality often exists in a pathologized state. When Tony does not understand his own sexual difference, he believes this is a medical issue or something that is "wrong", implying that it can or must be fixed. This in turn produces the strong negative feelings that are

apparent in these fics. In two stories, these negative feelings become so severe that Tony even becomes suicidal (Marvelgeek42, 2016; miniongrin, 2014b). Both stories only discuss suicidality briefly and after the suicidal feelings have passed. Although the depth of these suicidal feelings is not discussed, their mere presence does speak to the severity of negative emotions that authors of this sample can associate with asexuality when it is unrealized or unacknowledged and, therefore, pathologized.

In other stories, Tony's negative feelings center on the fear of what other people will think. In these situations, Tony knows he is asexual. Here, the negative emotions stem from how others might respond to a coming-out. For instance, in *You're Using It Wrong* (the_casual_cheesecake, 2020), Tony is dating Steve and preparing to confess that he is "not normal". This prospect is terrifying to Tony; it makes him feel "like a surgeon about to inform the next of kin". When he confesses that he does not enjoy sex, Steve shows signs of anger and Tony is "cowering a little in the face of it". Even when Steve reassures him that he is only angry at the idea of others potentially having forced Tony into sex, Tony remains upset. He tells Steve he is "broken", and the narration shows his strong emotions: "Tony spits the word out like venom, like if he directs enough poison at the corner of his mind that refuses to cooperate it would curl up and die and let him be *right*" (the_casual_cheesecake, 2020). Although the feeling of "being wrong" is still present here, the story focuses mostly on how Steve will respond.

Other confessions of asexuality—whether Tony uses that word or does not (yet) name his sexual difference—are often accompanied by similarly negative feelings due to the feared outcome. "I was scared I was gonna lose her," Tony says about the time he told his partner he is asexual in *Bite the Bullet* (baloobird, 2019a). In other stories, before coming out, Tony experiences feelings such as being "uncomfortable with the truth" and "nervousness" about

coming out (xtaticpearl, 2017); he worries about "being alone forever" if he is honest about his asexuality (flailingmuse, 2016); he believes that there is "something fundamentally wrong with him" and wonders, prior to a coming-out, "If he told her the truth would she laugh at him? Call him a freak?" (angel1972, 2014); or he follows up an agonized confession with a plea for compassion: "I'm asexual. […] I just don't like sex in general. Some other asexuals do, but I don't. Please don't hate me" (orphan_account, 2015a). In *Parts We Keep* (Anonymous, 2017), Tony is already together with his partner Steve, who is supportive of his asexuality at the start of the story. This is contrasted with much of Tony's life prior to dating Steve. "There's no anxiety in being alone with Steve. It's really saying something because that anxiety has been part of Tony's life for as long as he can remember." So, although Tony does not experience this anxiety in the story, it is still made clear that being closeted was an anxiety-inducing experience for him.

Compared to the *Iron Man* sample, there are more *Sherlock* stories that do not explore any negative emotions surrounding asexuality. These stories are often *Label-Only* stories, or they are *Asexual Relationship* stories in which asexuality plays a relatively minor role, focusing instead on feelings such as domestic bliss or comfort. However, negative emotions do occur in multiple *Sherlock* stories. When they do, they take roughly similar shapes to those described in *Iron Man*. Like Tony, Sherlock struggles in multiple stories to come to grips with his sexual difference. In *How Would You Know* (Lothiriel84, 2014), Sherlock "starts wondering what's wrong with himself" when he is a teenager and lies awake at night trying to figure out the answer. Likewise, in *Let Your Body Decide* (solrosan, 2012), Sherlock believes something is wrong with him; he discusses this with his brother Mycroft. He "hesitated and looked down on his hands again" before he is able to speak, and then states "Biologically speaking, I should want to reproduce. This is not normal". In the story *This Heart is a Stone* (Elster, 2011), a female

version of Sherlock sleeps with several men before realizing that she is asexual. When she first discovers that sex, for her, is not all it is held up to be, she becomes anxious: "Or maybe there was something wrong with her. Maybe everything they said about her in school was true. Maybe she was a freak, a sociopath, someone who could not love" (Elster, 2011). Thus, in multiple *Sherlock* stories, Sherlock experiences worry and shame over his sexual difference when he does not understand it. Like Tony, he pathologizes this unknown sexual difference by assuming there is something wrong, broken or freakish about him.

Similarly, Sherlock experiences anxiety over coming out or otherwise having to inform people (especially romantic partners) of his sexual difference. For instance, in *I Want to Die Knowing I had a Long, Full Life in Your Arms* (nutmeag83, 2016), Sherlock and John begin a romantic relationship and talk about what they want. Sherlock is distressed when he says, "I'm worried about tempting you. Physically. I didn't want you to be uncomfortable because I couldn't give you what you needed". Later, discussing details of what he wants, Sherlock takes a "shaky breath", and John realizes he is "nervous? Scared" (nutmeag83, 2016). In *Love and Boundaries*, John asks Sherlock to discuss his boundaries when it comes to physical touch. Sherlock "shifted in his seat" and speaks "with a grimace" as he explains that sex is not something he is interested in (Sholette [Janie_17], 2013). Similarly, In *And They Danced* (UltimateGryffindork, 2017), Sherlock explains to Molly, his friend who has a crush on him, that he cannot give her the relationship she wants; he speaks "shakily" and struggles to maintain eye contact as he tells her "I can't give you that. I wish I could, and – and John thinks I can – but I *can't*" (UltimateGryffindork, 2017, emphasis in original). In another story, Sherlock tells his flatmate John that he will not have strangers over for sex because he is not interested in sex; the story states that this coming-out "made him feel very insecure" (solrosan, 2012).

In several stories, Sherlock's analytical mind also causes him to be frustrated by his asexuality, because he does not understand it. In *an infinite series of accidents* (Laura JV, 2018), Sherlock says that he is not bothered by his lack of interest in sex, but "it bothers me that I don't know if it is something inherent to myself". In another story, his frustration lies in the fact that he is unable to adequately explain his asexuality to his friend Molly (Lothiriel84, 2017).

In short, asexuality is associated with negative emotional valence in a number of ways and situations. Generally, asexuality produces fear, anxiety and shame in Tony and Sherlock when it is unrecognized; the character notices a sexual difference compared to other people, and subsequently believes that there is something "wrong" or off about him, which results in fear and shame. These negative feelings are therefore associated with a sense of pathologization, which is evidenced by the common use of the word "broken" as a (self-)descriptor of asexual characters. This ties asexual characters' experiences in with the discursive history of asexuality as a pathologized state (see Chapter 1). Negative feelings also come to the forefront when either of the two asexual characters informs other characters of this sexual difference, either by coming out as asexual, or by using other language. The asexual character worries that other people will (also) think they are wrong or broken, or that confessing asexuality will result in romantic rejection. Although shame and fear can occur together or in overlapping ways, in general, asexuality seems to produce shame over being different and fear of other people's reactions.

Positive Emotions: Relief and Pride

I now turn to the question of when asexuality produces positive emotional valence, that is, when it is associated with positive emotions such as pride, relief, or happiness. Unsurprisingly, positive emotions surrounding asexuality often take place in situations that are

the counterparts of those in which negative emotions are at the fore. That is, positive emotions tend to be associated with asexuality being recognized/realized and with being accepted by other characters.

In counterpoint to Tony's negative feelings when he does not have words to describe his sexual difference, the moment of learning about the term "asexuality" is often one associated with strong feelings of relief. "This is a thing", Tony says in *I Want You To Love Me (i want you to leave me)* (miniongrin, 2014), when he learns what asexuality is at a Pride Parade: "Oh my god. I didn't think this was a thing. But it has a *name*." The story describes that he "feels alive, feels okay for the first time in—well, a long time"; afterwards, he has "a brand-new spring to his step". Thus, learning to name his sexual difference brings strong feelings of joy and relief. Multiple other stories showcase similar feelings of relief. In *seek me for comfort – call me for solace* (lawful_feral_jake, 2018), Tony has struggled with feeling different until his friend Bruce suggests he might be asexual. The next day, Tony has researched asexuality online, and "there's a smile on Tony's lips […] Bruce realizes it's been a long time since he's seen a genuine smile on Tony's face". Thus, learning about asexuality and the asexual community has produced happiness for Tony. In multiple stories, the feelings of relief upon learning about asexuality are so strong that Tony cries. "I'm not… the only one?" Tony asks in *Mutually Assured Destruction* (Reioka, 2017) when Bruce introduces him to the concept of asexuality, before he "let out a stuttering sob". The feeling of relief is not fully exclusive to Tony as an asexual character; it is occasionally shown in other asexual characters as well. For instance, in *Chocolate Cake* (SailorChibi, 2018), Tony (himself asexual) mentors younger superhero Peter. Peter doubts his sexuality, and when Tony tells him that asexuality exists and what it is, Peter experiences "potent relief and gratitude" (SailorChibi, 2018).

Positive emotions also play a large role following positive coming-out experiences. In multiple stories, Tony's coming-out takes the form of informing a romantic partner that he does not enjoy sex. In most stories, the partner is accepting of this (see also Chapter 7), which is a highly positive experience for Tony in these stories. For instance, in *Oh Darling, There's Nothing Traditional About You* (InTheShadows, 2019), Tony's partner Bucky reassures him that "if sex is off the table that in no way changes my feelings towards you"; Tony's response to this is that, "the sheer amount of hope growing is [sic] Tony's chest is almost too much" (InTheShadows, 2019). Similarly, when Tony's date Steve reassures him that he "could care less about sex" in *Fearless* (orphan_account, 2015a), this results in "nothing more than pure amazement in Tony's mind". In *greyscale*, Tony has been psyching himself up to come out to his partner Steve, when Steve instead comes out as asexual to him, meaning Tony will be able to have a sexless relationship with him. In response, "something shifts in the way Tony's holding himself. He relaxes […] When he smiles it's small but real". Thus, in each of these stories, when Tony's asexuality is accepted, it results in powerful positive feelings of relief and happiness. Again, these feelings can be strong enough that they result in crying. In *Enough* (cptxrogers, 2016), Tony tells his partner that he is not comfortable with sex, and she reassures him that she would never push him, which "was the closest he'd heard to acceptance, and he burst into pathetically grateful sobs" (cptxrogers, 2016).

The story *The Point of No Return* (baloobird, 2019b) shows a rare instance of an asexual Tony being outed, rather than making the decision to come out himself, when video is leaked of him talking to his protegee Peter about his asexual relationship. Although this situation is initially stressful for Tony, he eventually decides to give a press conference to confirm the story. Once he has done this, he feels relief, smiling at his partner Pepper and thinking "It's all gonna

be okay" (baloobird, 2019b). This particular instance of positive emotions after a coming-out stands out among the other stories, not only because the coming-out was forced, but also because the positive reaction does not depend on the reaction to the coming out, which is not depicted beyond journalists wanting to ask more questions. Here, the implication is that the mere act of being open may have produced the positive feelings, even if not everyone responds with acceptance.

As discussed above, it is less common for *Sherlock* fic to focus on negative emotions surrounding asexuality. Similarly, positive emotions about asexuality are also less commonly explored. To be clear, Sherlock frequently experiences positive emotions, including about relationships and intimacy (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). However, as discussed, many *Sherlock* stories do not extensively explore asexuality. The *Realization/Coming Out* story type is much less common in *Sherlock* fic, giving less opportunity to connect positive emotions about an asexual realization or coming out.

However, some stories do showcase Sherlock experiencing positive emotions about asexuality, which are often similar to the ones experienced by Tony Stark. For instance, in *Let Your Body Decide* (Solrosan, 2012), Sherlock does experience a realization arc. When he learns of the word asexual, he realizes "There was a word for it. There was a word for him" and he "hadn't felt this at ease for years", experiences "euphoria" and views this as "brilliant news". Thus, Sherlock experiences the same relief and joy that Tony does in similar situations. Later in the same story, Sherlock comes out to John; afterwards, he is "grateful" for John's acceptance.

However, in most stories, these feelings are not deeply explored. In *A Beekeeper and His Blogger* (HumsHappily, 2016), Sherlock and John are in a relationship and John has shared "the definition of asexuality" with Sherlock. Here, Sherlock responds with "hours of research on the

topic and then a sudden acceptance", and "one late night, months after the fact, Sherlock thanked John in a very sleepy voice, for showing him that he "wasn't broken"" (HumsHappily, 2016). Thus, although this realization is also associated with positive feelings, they are not clearly defined or explored in depth beyond these sentences.

In other stories, positive feelings occur even without a clear realization/coming out arc. For instance, in Lothiriel84's *How Would You Know?* (2014), Sherlock struggles with "his own sexuality, or lack thereof". At the end of the story, Sherlock briefly has a girlfriend and pretends to enjoy her closeness. When the relationship ends, he finds that "it's such a relief when the ruse is finally over". Though Sherlock does not have the asexual realization that is commonly described in *Iron Man* stories, he does experience relief when he stops pretending to be something he is not (i.e. sexually interested).

In short, *Sherlock* stories can show the same positive emotions as *Iron Man* stories and often do so under similar circumstances. However, it is less common, and many stories do not engage with the emotional valence of asexuality; instead, asexuality is merely present as a fact, or even as an influence on the plot, without being associated with strong emotions. This may be due to the fact that most deep emotions about asexuality appear in *Realization/Coming Out* stories, which often have a clear emotional arc from negative to positive emotions. Therefore, I will now demonstrate how negative and positive emotions about asexuality occur together by examining several *Realization/Coming Out* stories in depth.

Realization and Coming Out: The Emotional Arcs of Asexuality

In order to demonstrate how asexuality's negative and positive emotional valence combine into a story arc, I examined two stories through a close reading. The first is *I Want You*

To Love Me (i want you to leave me) (miniongrin, 2014a); to analyze this story, I also draw on

some phrases from its sequel *Wish There Was Something Inside Me (to keep you beside me)*

(miniongrin, 2014b), which is also in the sample. This story represents an asexual realization arc

and the accompanying shift from negative to positive emotionality. I chose to do a close reading

of this story because it exemplifies the elements of this arc, one which is clearly present in many

stories in the sample. The second story is *Denial* by stark2ash (2019), a story that showcases how

elements of such an emotional story arc can be present even when the arc is not fully completed.

The first story by miniongrin, *I Want You To Love Me (i want you to leave me)* (2014a)

portrays a realization arc. At the start of the story, Tony is twelve and "gets The Talk" (i.e. sex

education) from his father. He is "mystif[ied]" by the information that people experience a desire

for sex, and "the incomplete, inexact nature of the information bothers him". Thus, in the

opening paragraphs, Tony experiences confusion over an apparent sexual difference, and

negative emotions are associated with this lack of understanding from the start. Subsequently, as

a teenager at university, Tony is "vaguely uncomfortable" when his peers discuss sex and girls.

Tony copes with this discomfort by mimicking what everyone around him does; he parties and

flirts in order to produce the interest in sex that he appears to be missing. However, he is so

strongly repulsed by the idea of having sex that he throws up when a girl touches him at a party.

Despite this, he develops a habit of picking up girls to sleep with them; he gets drunk before sex

in order to stand it despite his discomfort. Eventually, he starts a relationship with his friend and

employee Pepper. Although Tony is romantically interested in Pepper, this relationship also

produces negative emotions: "Something in Tony freezes when he realizes what he just ruined"

is the reaction to his and Pepper's first kiss. This fear/sadness is produced because Tony does not

think he will be able to successfully navigate a romantic relationship when he finds sex

disgusting. The relationship is therefore "terrifying", because Tony considers himself "too broken to love his girlfriend". He drinks to psych himself up to sleep with her, and afterwards experiences a "fearful, *lost* sensation" (emphasis in original). Soon after, Tony breaks up with Pepper because he is unable to stand the idea of continuing to have sex with her. Looking back on this, he describes sex with Pepper as "I couldn't, I tried, […] I hated it and, and I *couldn't*—I would have killed myself" (miniongrin, 2014b, emphasis in original). Thus, his attempts to force himself to (unknowingly) act against his asexuality produce such strong negative feelings that it resulted in suicidality.

The emotional turning point in the story occurs when Tony and his fellow superheroes attend a Pride parade. Tony continues to feel uncomfortable, because he does not feel like he belongs: "He isn't bisexual, or gay or apparently even *straight*, he doesn't want *anyone*. He's just a freak" (miniongrin, 2014a). At the pride parade, Tony notices a small group of people "defined by black, white, purple and gray" (commonly used as asexual Pride colours) and approaches them out of curiosity. Picking up a discarded flyer, he reads the word "Asexuality" and a definition. The introduction of this term produces a marked shift for Tony: "Tony's world? Has just been completely flipped upside down".

Initially, this shift is still followed by some anxiety and confusion as Tony questions asexual Pride attendee Michelle. However, after they have answered some of his questions that confirm he might be asexual, he gets a "very stubborn lump in his throat", and when Michelle asks if he has other questions, Tony "laughs lightly" and becomes "suddenly animated"; he "feels alive, feels okay for the first time in—well, a long time". Tony joins up with the asexual group at the Pride and decides that he "will be as proud […] as he *wants* to be" (emphasis in original) about being part of the asexual community. When one of his superhero teammates

questions whether he belongs with the asexuals, asking him "you're *ace*?", Tony "grins, because it sounds *so good* said out loud" (emphasis in original). In the final paragraph of the story, Tony resolves to explain to Pepper that he is asexual and why he broke up with her and "finds he's looking forward to it". Thus, once the term asexuality has been introduced and Tony has had his moment of realization, the emotional tone of the story shifts toward highly positive. Whereas unrealized asexuality was associated with anxiety/fear, disgust and loneliness, realized or named asexuality is associated with joy, pleasure, feeling alive, and hope for the future. This story also exemplifies the trend to devote more time to the negative emotions than the positive; the introduction of the term "asexuality" occurs around the three-quarter mark, and some mild negative feelings persist briefly after this.

This trend is even stronger in *Denial* by stark2ash (2019). This fic follows a similar storyline: it opens with Tony as a child, experiencing alienation when he watches peers flirt with each other. Tony decides to employ a strategy of "fake it 'till you make it" (stark2ash, 2019). When he and his first girlfriend are home alone, he "leads her upstairs, and ignores the way his hands shake"—in this story, much as in miniongrin's (2014), Tony is uncomfortable with sex but pushes along anyway out of a desire to be normal. As an adult, he continues to "[flirt] until he feels sick". He experiences increasing "panic" and engages in self-destructive behaviour such as heavy drinking, both due to his continued discomfort with his unrecognized asexuality, and as a response to traumatic events he experiences in his new career as a superhero. In this story, the asexual revelation is spurred on by Tony's new assistant Natasha. She is a trained spy and expert in reading body language, which allows her to become the first person to notice that Tony is faking his sexual attraction. She confronts him, saying "You can fool the rest of the world, but I can tell that it's not real. […] It doesn't mean you're broken, or wrong." Thus, she contradicts his

negative, pathologized view of himself. Only at the end of the conversation does she introduce

the word "asexual", by leaving Tony a post-it with the word on it. Only one line follows this

revelation:

> It's only after the door closes behind her that Tony sees the new purple sticky note on the
>
> top of his computer. It has one word on it.
>
> "Asexual."
>
> Tony Stark is twenty-nine and he cries with the webpage open in his office, and he reads.
>
> (stark2ash, 2019)

This concludes the story. The crying in the last line is arguably ambivalent, as the story never

clarifies whether this is crying in sorrow, relief, joy, sadness or some other emotion. However,

placed in the context of the *Realization/Coming Out* story type that is common in the sample,

this implies that the crying is with relief and/or joy, because the emotional arc of the story type is

completed. *Denial* (stark2ash, 2019) thus highlights several features of the emotional arc of

asexuality: the stronger emphasis on negative emotion than positive emotion, the emotional

turning point associated with the introduction of the term "asexuality" in this story type, and the

intertextuality of fanfiction, which often derives its meaning partially from the larger fanfiction

discourse in which it is written.

Evaluating the Emotional Valence of Asexuality

In this chapter, I have analyzed the emotional valence of asexuality in my sample of

fanfiction. As I have shown, strong emotions surrounding asexuality are most common in

Realization/Coming Out stories, although they do occur in other story types as well. In this

sample of fanfiction, asexuality was most commonly associated with negative emotions such as

fear and shame when it was unrealized or unconfessed. These negative emotions were then diminished and replaced by positive emotions of relief and joy when the asexual character had a realization of asexuality or when they came out and were accepted by another character.

The pattern of positive and negative emotions surrounding asexuality in this sample has a number of implications. First, it is likely that this sample of stories contains autobiographical elements (from asexual authors) as well as elements from online asexual activist communities. Asexual fanfiction therefore likely reflects, at least in part, the experiences of real asexual people. This implies that asexuality can be associated with strong negative emotions for asexual people, up to and including suicidality. It also implies that realization and coming out are important, life-changing events for asexual people, since they play such an important role in asexual storytelling. The depth of negative emotion experienced by asexual characters is therefore connected to sociological work studying the experiences of real asexual people, such Kristina Gupta's interview study (2017), which highlighted the role that pathologization, negative perceptions and coming-out play in asexual people's lives. It also highlights the importance of providing education about asexuality, because an unawareness of the concept of asexuality plays such a strong negative role in the lives of asexual characters, and presumably by extension, asexual individuals.

The sample contained two recurring emotional arcs surrounding realization and coming out, particularly in the *Iron Man* half of the sample. These emotional arcs center around a strong shift from negative to positive emotions after a character has "realized" and/or "confessed" their asexuality. This type of storytelling follows the pattern of a *Rebirth*, one of the seven plots identified by Christopher Booker (2004), in which an outside event forces a character to change. In these asexual fanfiction stories, the character's change—from "broken" to "asexual" or from

"closeted" to "out"—is emphasized by creating a stark emotional change between the before and the after. In a 2010 study of online autobiographical narratives of change, such as religious conversion/deconversion, Thomas DeGloma concluded that such narrators often "split their lives into discrete periods to mark social distinctions" (p. 535). These stories can additionally function as "a social action designed to win others over to a common understanding of some issue or situation" (p. 536). In the case of asexual fanfiction, *Realization/Coming Out* narratives can function to win over asexual readers to realize or confess their asexuality, which is portrayed as leading to more positive emotionality. Alternatively, the stories can address a non-asexual audience and draw on familiar emotions (shame/anxiety, joy/relief) in order to provide a narrative of asexuality that can be understood and empathized with even by a non-asexual reader.

As discussed, stories of the *Realization/Coming Out* type tended to focus more strongly on asexuality's negative emotional valence than on the positive. This trend may simply derive from the increased conflict, and storytelling potential, that arises from negative emotionality. However, the high focus on negative emotionality, combined with the portrayal of realization or coming out as the "solution" to the problem of asexuality's negative emotionality, means that asexuality is often portrayed as a problem for the character that is "afflicted" with it. The goal of the stories appears to be to claim that asexuality is *not* a problem, so long as it is recognized, named and accepted. However, the asexual character—and asexual Tony especially—comes to the fore as a conflicted, often anxious person.

In sum, in this sample of asexual fanfiction, asexuality can be associated with both positive and negative emotions. In particular, it tends to be associated with negative emotions when the asexual character does not understand his asexuality and pathologizes his sexual difference, or when he is closeted and fears rejection. By contrast, naming asexuality and coming

out are both associated with strong positive emotions. In this discourse, it appears that the ideal

asexual state is a realized and uncloseted one. This narrative may reflect the lives of real asexual

people and shows the importance of asexual education. However, it can also narrow the

discursive possibilities for those whose asexuality is unclear, diffuse, or does not strictly "fit"

standard definitions of asexuality, as well as for those who are not interested in coming out.

Chapter 7. Asexual Characters in Relationships

"You being asexual won't change anything at all, other than making me adore you even more."

Fearless, orphan_account (2015a)

As established in Chapter 5, the vast majority of definitions of asexuality do not preclude the possibility of an asexual character having a romantic relationship. Having no romantic feelings or desires is categorized under a different term: aromanticism. This implies that most or all asexual characters have the same desires as, say, heterosexual or gay characters when it comes to romantic relationships. Asexual characters may develop crushes, form and maintain romantic relationships, and experience rejection or break-ups much in the same way that non-asexuals do. However, asexuality usually has at least some impact on the asexual character's desire for a sex life, which is a key aspect of most romantic relationships.

In this chapter, I discuss how asexual characters navigate romantic relationships and what role their asexuality plays in this. I analyze discursive statements pertaining to romantic relationships, paying special attention to stories that fall into the *Asexual Relationship* category because these stories have a romantic relationship or its formation as their main theme. My analysis in this chapter shows that the discourse of asexual fanfiction portrays asexuality as a potential barrier to the formation of a happy relationship. However, I argue that the discourse offers multiple pathways through or around this barrier, each with different implications for asexual characters and their authors and readers.

Asexual Characters in Established, Happy Relationships

In Chapter 4, I identified the story type *Asexual Relationship*, in which a romantic relationship with an asexual character is the most important theme of the story. As I discuss in this chapter, this story type usually focuses on the formation of a romantic bond, and it forefronts the possibility of asexuality as a source of conflict or a barrier to the formation of the relationship. However, a number of stories contain asexual characters in romantic relationships without presenting asexuality as a barrier. These include *Asexual Relationship* type stories that are so-called "relationship studies", i.e. stories that have little to no plot but consist of one or more scenes that outline a static situation (in this case a relationship). They also include stories of other types (e.g. *Label-Only*, *Realization/Coming Out*) in which the plot does not focus on a relationship or its formation, but the romantic relationship forms a small subplot or is simply presented as a fact about the asexual character without forming a source of story conflict or plot movements. Often in these cases, the asexual character's relationship predates the first scene in the story. Before examining how asexuality can function as a barrier to romance, I will first discuss these established romantic relationships.

A number of stories in the sample showed the asexual character in a pre-existing, happy relationship. For instance, the story *Good according to (y)our standards* (Marvelgeek42, 2016) focuses on Tony coming out as asexual to his fellow superheroes, but mentions at the end that Tony has a partner: his girlfriend Rosabel goes to Pride with Tony and his fellow superheroes in the last scene and wears a t-shirt with an asexual slogan, and Tony "thought his girlfriend looked stunning in it" (Marvelgeek42, 2016). In the relationship study *Simple and Unspoken* (Jetainia, 2018)*,* Tony is in a relationship with Phil. The story relates how Tony and Phil take care of each other, such as Phil ensuring that Tony gets enough sleep and food when he is working on a new

invention. The story describes their love as "simple and silent […] expressed in small actions and quiet words" (Jetainia, 2018). In another story, *Parts We Keep* (Anonymous, 2017), Tony is in a relationship with Steve from the start of the story. This relationship "amazes [Tony] sometimes" with how comfortable it is. Similarly, in *Sam's Ace in the Hole* (Anonymous, 2017), Tony is dating Sam; the men are both asexual and enjoy the lack of sexual tension between them.

Stories with an established, happy romantic relationship are quite common in the *Sherlock* fandom. Several stories offer a relationship study or character study that focuses on Sherlock and his partner John growing old together and living happily in retirement. In the *Label-Only* story *Boundaries* (orphan_account, 2013), Sherlock and John have retired to a house in the countryside, where John gardens and Sherlock keeps bees; they "intend to spend the rest of their lives together". Similarly, in *A Beekeeper and His Blogger* (HumsHappily, 2014), Sherlock and John are living out retirement in a cottage as a married couple; they are described as belonging together "like waves and the moon, or the sky and sea" (HumsHappily, 2014). Other stories focus on Sherlock solving cases, positioning his relationship with John as a minor aspect of the story (hoc_voluerunt, 2015; orphan_account, 2016, tocourtdisaster, 2013). Although stories with John as Sherlock's partner are most common in the *Sherlock* fandom, some stories also show Sherlock in a committed, happy relationship with others. In *Say That I'm Fond* (Snow, 2011), John learns that Sherlock is dating the Doctor (from the BBC series Doctor Who) and that they are both asexual. It astonishes John that "the two of you are in a relationship… without sex?" but Sherlock and the Doctor are both content with this. In two other stories, Sherlock is in a relationship with the minor character Victor Trevor (in_a_different_box_to_you, 2015) and in an incestuous, though non-sexual, romantic relationship with his brother Mycroft (LightDarkPheonix, 2014).

Some of these stories specify that the asexual character and his partner do not have sex (e.g. Jetainia, 2018; orphan_account, 2016; hoc_voluerunt, 2015; HumsHappily, 2018) or that they *do* have sex on occasion (tocourtdisaster, 2013), while other stories do not discuss the characters' sex lives. Taken together, this significant subset of stories shows the possibility of romance for asexual characters. In particular, in contrast with the stories I discuss subsequently, they offer the possibility of a romance in which asexuality is not a source of any conflict or a significant amount of stress.

Asexual Characters' Relationship History

In many stories of the *Asexual Relationship* type, the narrative arc revolves around the formation of a romantic relationship. In most cases, asexuality is presented as a potential source of conflict: the asexual character is worried that their asexuality will hinder the relationship or lead to a breakup when it is discovered. Often, the asexual character has actually experienced this. For instance, in a story where Tony has dealt with multiple partners who tried to force sex on him, he "knew how all his relationships ended. Awkward and strained friendships" (harryhermionerw, 2017); in another story, Tony tells a potential partner "I won't change my mind [about having sex] and you'll get frustrated, believe me, it happens every time […] you'll realize that you've wasted all that time with someone who won't put out and you'll resent me" (Potrix, 2016). In another story, Tony tells his friend Loki, "I think I'm asexual. And I'm going to be alone forever. […] And Pepper broke up with me last week because of it." (flailingmuse, 2016). He later specifies that Pepper broke up with him because "she hated that we never. You know. Had sex a lot" (flailingmuse, 2016).

Although Sherlock is portrayed more often as having had a sparse relationship history, he has had similar experiences in some stories. For instance, in *Unusual Symmetry* (mresundance, 2010), Sherlock has had a string of unsuccessful relationships, the last of which "lasted three weeks – remarkable, actually – before he was reduced to screaming about how Sherlock was so cold, so insensitive" (mresundance, 2010). This "last failure […] prompted Sherlock to simply give up", and he is single for several years. Similarly, in *Us and Mrs. Holmes*, Sherlock tells John that he used to have a boyfriend, but "we broke up, mostly because I wasn't as… how did he put it? Oh, sex driven, as he was" (ElizabethisjustaKitten, 2019). Thus, both Sherlock and Tony in their asexual depictions often have had one or more relationships that failed due to sexual incompatibility. As Tony sums it up in *Variations on a Theme* (ineptshieldmaid, 2015), "I'm not so interested in [sex]. Not many people can work with that." Thus, relationships are clearly a fraught prospect for both characters due to their asexuality, and both have difficulty in finding a partner who is compatible with them. This also explains why the prospect of beginning a new relationship and having to come out to a romantic partner is often portrayed as a source of substantial anxiety, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In *Asexual Relationship* stories, two subtypes are present that portray solutions to the problem of asexuality in relationships. I refer to these as the *Both Uninterested* subtype and the *Sex Renounced* subtype. These two storylines are equally common within the set of *Asexual Relationship* stories, and I discuss them each in turn below.

Both Uninterested: When the Problem Is Not a Problem

In the *Both Uninterested* subtype of stories about asexual relationships, the asexual character experiences anxiety about telling his (potential) partner that he's asexual and not

interested in sex. When the moment comes, however, the partner surprises him by confessing their own disinterest in sex, either due to asexuality or to other factors.

Perhaps the most straightforward narrative that provides an asexual character with a compatible romantic partner is one in which that partner is also asexual. This happens in the two *Sherlock* stories *Say That I'm Fond* (Snow, 2011) and *The Love Song of V. Trevor* (in_a_different_box_to_you, 2015), which were discussed above as they do not chronicle the formation of the relationship, but merely portray the existing, happy relationship. In the *Iron Man* fandom, the stories do often relate the formation of such a romantic bond. These stories, such as *Loneliness Bay* (Jay Barou, 2018), *Dollars to Donuts* (flailingmuse, 2016), *Stay the Night* (orphan_account, 2015b), *Greyscale* (S_Hylor, 2018), and *Sex Need Not Apply* (angel1972), all feature a nervous confession of asexuality by Tony or by his romantic partner, which is then echoed by the other character, leading to the joyful revelation that they are well-matched in this area. "You've said exactly what I wanted and needed to hear", Tony responds to the mutual revelation in one story (Jay Barou, 2018); in another, he "nodded, satisfied" upon learning of his partner's asexuality (orphan_account, 2015b). The shared asexuality opens up the possibility of "you and me, forever" (S_Hylor, 2018) for the romantic relationship.

Shared asexuality is not the only possible version of a *Both Uninterested* story. The *Iron Man* and *Sherlock* fandoms each have a separate path as well. For Tony, this involves being paired with a character whose past includes trauma or loss that makes sex impossible or uninteresting for them. For instance, in *No* (harryhermionerw, 2017), Tony has been on several dates with Bucky, but decides to break up with him because "My body is broken. And I don't do sex. You'll want it, […] and I don't want to put either of us in that situation". However, Bucky surprises him by saying "I didn't know how to put it into words but you did". He explains that

due to his traumatic history—he was captured, tortured and brainwashed by enemies—he no longer feels comfortable having sex. He adds "I don't miss it. Don't really want it, neither", and he states he does not want to "fix" his condition. They decide to "cuddle a little while, then […] talk about boundaries" (harryhermionerw, 2017). A highly similar storyline is depicted in *Five Times Tony And Bucky Had To Talk About Their Relationship With Others (And One Time They Finally Talked To Each Other)* by andrea_deer (2017), which also depicts a relationship between Tony and Bucky. Tony has been avoiding sex, and Bucky eventually confronts him. Tony says he is willing to have sex, but doing so on a regular basis is "not something that holds [his] interest all that much". Bucky responds by explaining that, after his traumatic experiences, "I don't really enjoy the idea of sex anymore and I was kind of bracing myself for when you're gonna ask about it" (andrea_deer, 2017). In *Two Arms to Hold Him* (Amledo, 2012), Steve tells Tony that he has changed after losing his first love: "There's a certain kind of love that I'm never going to experience again, and I don't want to, there will only ever be the one girl." In this story, although Steve is straight, he is no longer interested in pursuing relationships with women or having sex; instead, he loves Tony and wants to be with him (Amledo, 2012). In *Attraction,* Tony eventually begins a relationship with Bruce Banner, a superhero who transforms into the dangerous creature The Hulk whenever his heartbeat is elevated—including during sex. This makes him a good romantic pairing for Tony: "Needless to say, Tony Stark and Bruce Banner were a perfect match: one was sexually repulsed, the other *couldn't* have sex." (Shunters, 2017). In each of these stories, the other character's non-sexuality is *not* described as asexuality. It is presented as something distinct from Tony's asexuality, but it nevertheless makes the two characters compatible, or a "perfect match" (Shunters, 2017).

In the *Sherlock* fandom, a common iteration of a *Both Uninterested* situation involves pairing asexual Sherlock with John Watson, who is heterosexual. In *It's A Date, or, The One Where Sherlock Is A Bit Clueless* (Sholette [Janie_17], 2015), shortly after they have begun a relationship, Sherlock tells John "We're not having sex", and John responds with "God, I should hope not". He explains "I'm not sexually attracted to you" and when Sherlock asks about the women he used to date, John says "They were fine […] but they weren't you" (Sholette [Janie_17], 2015). In *There's No Truth Like Home*, Sherlock and John's relationship is seen through the eyes of detective Greg Lestrade. When he asks John whether or not they are together, John tells him, "Yes. Kinda. Not how you are thinking. I'm not gay" (NotJuli, 2019). He tells Greg that they are not sleeping together, because Sherlock "doesn't do that and I'm not into blokes like that- or at all" (NotJuli, 2019). In *an infinite series of accidents* (Laura JV, 2018), John says that, before he began loving Sherlock, "I didn't have any idea that – that people could feel this, and not somehow fall into bed". Although he regularly has sex, he has no particular desire to have sex with Sherlock (Laura JV, 2018). Thus, these stories forefront a relationship in which both Sherlock and John are content to be romantically involved, but not sexually, although for different reasons.

As shown above, relationships are often a source of anxiety for asexual characters, who believe that their lack of desire for sex means that they will eventually break up or be abandoned. However, *Both Uninterested* stories suggest the possibility of asexuals dating other people who are not interested in sex, whether it is because they are also asexual or because of reasons such as trauma or sexual incompatibility (i.e. heterosexuality). As Lysa Westberg Gabriel (2018) explored in her analysis of asexual fanfiction, some of these stories can be described as her "Body Otherwise Bound" type, in which an asexual character is paired with someone whose

bodily autonomy is impaired (e.g. by trauma). However, my analysis shows that this is not the only way in which asexual characters are romantically paired with sexually-uninterested partners; a more common solution is for the other partner to be a fellow asexual.

Sex Renounced: A Tenuous Solution?

In the second subtype of *Asexual Relationship* stories, which I named *Sex Renounced*, the asexual character confesses their asexuality, and in response, the non-asexual partner agrees to have a sex-less romantic relationship. Typically, this commitment to celibacy from the partner is given immediately after the asexual character comes out as asexual. For instance, in *Oh Darling, There's Nothing Traditional About You* (InTheShadows, 2019), Tony's agonized confession that he does not really want to have sex is met with his partner Bucky's statement that "if sex is off the table that in no way changes my feelings towards you. We don't have to have sex for you to be with me" (InTheShadows, 2019). Other stories similarly have the non-asexual partner quickly renounce sex through lines such as "Oh, Tony […] That's fine, I would never want to make you uncomfortable" (cptxrogers, 2016) or "different than I'm used to […] But it's you I love, not your dick" (Potrix, 2016).

A similar portrayal can be seen in *Sherlock* stories. In *La Petite Homicide* (fourleggedfish, 2015), Sherlock initiates sex with John due to his belief that he would lose his love if he fails to do so. After an unpleasant attempt at sex due to Sherlock's reluctance, John asks him "Do you actually want sex?" and Sherlock responds with "No. It's… horrible", to which John responds with "Then there won't be any sex" (fourleggedfish, 2015). In *Love and Boundaries* (Sholette [Janie_17], 2013), Sherlock tells John that he does not have any interest in sex, but if it is something John "truly requires [he] may be able to learn to like it", to which John

replies "I'm not going to force you to do something you don't like […] I would never force you to do anything just for the sake of my pleasure". Later in this story, Sherlock and John discuss the possibility of having sex in the future if Sherlock is interested; however, they now share the understanding that John is fully willing to be celibate if that is what Sherlock prefers.

In some cases, the partner deliberates before agreeing to celibacy. In *Bite the Bullet*, Tony talks about how his girlfriend Pepper came to him "a few days" after he told her he was asexual, at which point she told him "Just because I like sex, it doesn't mean that I have to have it" (baloobird, 2019a). However, in other cases, the partner not only responds quickly, but rejects the very notion that sexual incompatibility could give them pause or be cause for concern. In *Mutually Assured Destruction,* Bucky initially feels rejected when Tony is not enthusiastic about sex. When he learns that Tony is asexual, however, he quickly accepts this and says, "just because you don't want sex doesn't mean I'll stop loving you" (Reioka, 2017). He adds that "Would I be disappointed sometimes? Of course, but just because you don't want sex doesn't mean I can't go in the bathroom and jack off", suggesting that a lack of partnered sex is a minor issue at most and easily solvable through solo sex. Likewise, in *You're Using It Wrong* (the_casual_cheesecake, 2020), Tony confesses his attraction to Steve, saying he's broken and does not enjoy sex. Steve tells him "You're not broken, I don't care about you wanting to have sex with me, Tony, frankly, I'm a bit insulted you'd think I wouldn't wanna be with you for it. I love you" (the_casual_cheesecake, 2020). Thus, he not only agrees to not have sex with Tony; he goes so far as to say that this does not matter, and *should not* matter to any partner, as indicated by the fact that he's insulted by the idea that he would care. These statements, along with the propensity of partners to offer to be celibate, suggest that such a choice is an easy or a logical one for an asexual person's romantic partner.

However, some stories suggest that celibacy can produce tension due to the renounced sexuality. In *Is it real to me? Is it real to you?* (Sabriel, 2019), Tony has started a relationship with his best friend Rhodey. Although the relationship is generally a happy one, the story describes that they have their "biggest fight" when Rhodey "lets slip that he's kind of jealous for [sic] everyone else for having sex and Tony takes it the wrong way (i.e., that Rhodey cares beyond this gentle bout of jealousy)" (Sabriel, 2019). The implication of the parenthetical is that Rhodey's jealousy is not in itself a relationship-destroying problem; however, it does lead them to have a fight. In two stories, the asexual character's partner does not respect their agreement for a non-sexual but exclusive relationship. In *Clouds*, Tony's partner Steve cheats on him because of his "physical needs. I *needed* to have sex with someone" (SailorChibi, 2017a, emphasis in original). In the *Sherlock* story *For Us* (TheMadKatter13, 2017), John initially agrees not to have sex with Sherlock, but later gives Sherlock the ultimatum that "either we fuck, or we're done", and Sherlock agrees with extreme reluctance to have sex.

In a few *Sherlock* stories, the tension of renounced sexuality is solved instead through an open relationship, in which the non-asexual partner (John) has sex with other people (Ivory Novelist, 2011; Laura JV, 2018; Blissfully_Different, 2014). However, in other stories, the possibility of an open relationship is discussed but ultimately not put into action (tfbl, 2013; Sholette [Janie_17], 2015). In two *Iron Man* stories, Tony offers the possibility of an open relationship to his partner in a bid to keep them despite preferring an exclusive relationship. In both cases, the partner realizes Tony is only pretending that this option is acceptable to him, and therefore refuses. (Sabriel, 2019; miniongrin, 2014b).

Evaluating Asexual Characters' Relationships

In many stories in my sample, the question of whether having a romantic relationship will be possible is a source of stress for the asexual character. Although some asexual characters are open to (sometimes) having sex, most are not. In these cases, asexuality presents as a problem: If I do not want to have sex, how will I have a loving romantic relationship? Without the possibility of sex, who would date me? However, the sample offers numerous possibilities for asexual characters to start and maintain romantic relationships. Perhaps the most straightforward is the *Both Uninterested* storyline: the asexual character is paired with someone who is also uninterested in sex. This solution could be considered boring from a storytelling perspective, because the plot can be summarized as "the conflict was actually a misunderstanding". However, compared to other story genres, fanfiction is often less concerned with plot and more concerned with character and emotion. From the standpoint of an asexual character's emotions, this solution is by far the most preferable, and it can therefore offer an emotionally satisfying story to its readers. *Both Uninterested* stories may function as a form of wish fulfilment fantasy for asexual authors and/or readers, who are able to imagine a low-conflict solution to the "problem" of asexuality in relationships.

When the other character *is* interested in sex, but the asexual character is not, the most common solution offered by this sample of stories is for the non-asexual partner to be celibate. This choice is often made quickly and presented as the obvious way forward. Many stories make references to asexual characters' failed past relationships. These relationships often ended in sexual infidelity or a break-up because the partner was no longer content to be celibate. Despite this, when the story focuses on an asexual character's new relationship formation, the partner's choice of celibacy comes paired with optimism. Few stories explore the idea that the partner may

be giving up something important or making a difficult choice. Instead, the partner states that the asexual person is worth it, that there is no hardship, or that there are simple solutions to the partner's sexual desires, such as masturbation. Thus, a contradiction is apparent here between the knowledge that celibacy is difficult for non-asexual people on the one hand, and the apparent ease with which non-asexual partners agree to give up sex for asexual Tony or Sherlock on the other hand. Similar to *Both Uninterested* stories, these stories of the *Sex Renounced* type may offer a form of wish fulfilment fantasy for asexual readers and writers and their allies. Despite openly portraying the difficulties that can appear in romances between asexual and non-asexual people, these readers and writers use fanfiction to imagine the possibility of a partner who easily embraces celibacy. Such a partner believes the asexual character is "worth it", or perhaps the non-asexual partner is simply a better person than the past boyfriends and girlfriends who were unable to live up to the asexual character's expectation that they would be able to give up sex. This can encourage an asexual reader or writer to imagine such a relationship for themselves. It can also be seen as an exhortation to non-asexual readers, who are encouraged to rise to the challenge of committing to celibacy in the event that they make a romantic connection with an asexual person.

Thus, many asexual fanfiction stories depict Tony and Sherlock in happy, long-term relationships or depict the formation of such relationships, both with fellow asexuals and with non-asexual partners. When the asexual character is paired with a fellow asexual or sexually-uninterested partner, stable, long-term partnerships are likely to result. When the relationship is with a non-asexual partner, however, asexual characters' failed past relationships and their anxiety surrounding the formation of relationships suggest that such a relationship, though positively depicted, can be fraught and potentially tenuous.

Chapter 8. Asexual Characters Having Sex

"He's uncomfortable in a visceral way; his body isn't made for this exercise and his brain doesn't know how to mitigate what's happening to him."

Parts We Keep, Anonymous (2017)

To some casual observers of fanfiction, it may seem that fanfiction *is* porn. Indeed, a significant amount of early research into fanfiction focuses on its erotic content (see Jenkins, 1992, p. 191). In the 1980s, pornographic fanfiction became an object of study in part because it was one of the few places where porn was produced by and for women (see Russ, 2014). However, pornography is by no means the only, or even the most common type of fanfiction. On AO3, around 60 per cent of available stories are rated for "General Audiences" or "Teen And Up Audiences" (toastystats, 2013), meaning they do not contain pornographic material. Of the 34 per cent that is rated "Mature" or "Explicit" (toastystats, 2013), not all works will feature explicit pornographic material. However, it is certainly true that *some* fanfiction is pornographic or otherwise contains depictions of sex. This was also the case in my sample, in which 14 stories fit the category *Asexual Sex*, meaning that sexual situations were the main theme of the story. This leads to the question: What does explicitly sexual fanfiction material look like when it involves asexual characters? A number of possibilities arise here, which I discuss in turn: Sex as unpleasant, sex as pleasant, or sex as complicated/conflicting. I discuss each of these possibilities in turn. This analysis shows that sex for asexual characters is constructed as presenting a variety of complicated possibilities, which highlights the diversity of asexual experiences with sex.

Unpleasant Sex

As discussed in Chapter 4, it is most common in my sample for asexual characters to have a generally negative view of sex. In 69 of the 100 stories, the asexual character was not motivated to have sex. In some cases, this was because the character saw sex as boring or not worth the effort; more commonly, however, the character saw sex as disgusting, frightening, or otherwise highly unpleasant. Stories that do not contain explicit sex can still contain indications of this. Sex or the idea of sex is described in terms such as "pretty gross" (WikketKrikket, 2014); making the asexual character feel "miserable" (DancingForRain, 2015) or "deeply betrayed" (angel1972, 2014); making "his skin crawl" (InTheShadows, 2015); and feeling "suffocating […] psychologically" (solrosan, 2012). In multiple stories, an asexual character is depicted as feeling sick, gagging or throwing up after sex (Miniongrin, 2014a; Shunters, 2017) or having anxiety or panic attacks (harryhermionerw, 2017; usedupshiver, 2017; solrosan, 2012). Thus, for many asexual characters, sex is actively unpleasant.

In many of these cases, no actual sexual situations are described—instead, a history of sex or the thought of sex is enough to prompt these negative feelings. How does this look in the stories that are specifically focused on asexual characters having sex? Of the stories in the *Asexual Sex* category, six focus on a situation in which the asexual character finds sex unpleasant. In the dark story *For Us* (TheMadKatter13, 2017), this unpleasant sex takes the form of rape. Sherlock and John are in a relationship and Sherlock has told John he does not want to have sex. In response, John cheats on Sherlock. When Sherlock confronts him and attempts to break up with him, John forces him to have sex instead. Sherlock hates even the thought of sex, which "sends his stomach into freefall". However, when John tells him, "either we fuck, or we're done", Sherlock is unable to give up on the idea of having John as a romantic partner, and he

reluctantly agrees to have sex. During the sex, which is described in detail, Sherlock feels

"hyper-aware of the sensations"; he finds this extremely unpleasant. He gives John oral sex,

which he finds "obscene and terrible". John then coerces him into anal sex, with Sherlock as the

receptive partner. When the stimulation turns Sherlock on, he "hated the sparks of pleasure […]

hated the way his cock began to take interests [sic] in the proceedings". John enjoys finding that

he is able to turn Sherlock on, and he is also "pleased that Sherlock was […] a virgin". The sex

ends when John orgasms, and he tells Sherlock that "We'll be better this way […] It'll be better",

suggesting that he plans to coerce Sherlock to have sex again. Sherlock is left feeling disgusted

and hopeless (TheMadKatter13, 2017). Unlike the vast majority of (asexual) fanfiction, this story

does not attempt to provide its reader with a happy ending. Instead, it depicts an instance of

corrective rape, i.e. coerced sex that is intended to change someone's sexual orientation (Brown,

2012). This form of aggression is experienced by asexual people, who report that sexual partners

believe they can be "cured" by sex (Deutsch, 2018). As can be seen in *For Us*, such an

experience can be deeply traumatizing for an asexual individual. It is notable here that

Sherlock's asexuality does not mean he is unable to have an erection or feel physical pleasure;

however, this sexual pleasure also evokes disgust.

Most fics that depict unpleasant asexual sex do not show rape or coercion. In several

instances, the asexual instead forces *himself* to have sex. For instance, in *La Petite Homicide*

(fourleggedfish, 2015), Sherlock believes John will eventually leave him if they do not have sex,

and therefore convinces John to have sex with him. In fact, he asks John not to stop, even if he

protests, in hopes of discovering whether it will "get better" at some point. John agrees and tries

to bring Sherlock to orgasm through manual sex, but Sherlock experiences "full body spasm[s]"

and eventually starts to sob, which John describes as "the overwrought sound that a man makes

when he really, truly cannot take any more". At this point, John refuses to continue, claiming that he is "practically raping you with my hand". Sherlock responds that he asked John to, so "it's consensual" (fourleggedfish, 2015). John eventually convinces Sherlock that he will not leave him, even if Sherlock does not enjoy sex, making this a *Sex Renounced* storyline (see Chapter 7).

This story shows that some asexual characters are willing to go to great lengths to have sex for their non-asexual partners, even if they find the sex deeply unpleasant. A similar dynamic occurs in *Parts We Keep* (Anonymous, 2017). This story presents a "fuck or die" scenario, a well-known trope in fanfiction in which one or more characters are exposed to drugs, hormones, or other substances that require them to have sex within a set time, or they will die. In *Parts We Keep*, Tony is dating Steve, who is not asexual but has agreed not to have sex. In the line of superhero duty, Steve is exposed to an alien substance that causes an altered state of consciousness and a debilitating need for sex; Tony agrees to have sex with him. Although he states he is "not sex-repulsed", he still experiences a slew of negative emotions while they have sex, including feeling "numb", "rage" and "anguish", and feeling "uncomfortable in a visceral way". The sex itself is also described in ways that convey these negative feelings, such as referring to "the obnoxious slap of their bodies" (Anonymous, 2017)—a not particularly titillating description.

In the story *Mutually Assured Destruction* (Reioka, 2017), Tony likewise attempts to endure sex for his partner, in this case because he has not informed his partner that he is asexual. Similar to the two stories just discussed, he finds the sex increasingly unpleasant as it moves past kissing, feeling jumpy and stiff. However, as soon as his partner touches his penis, he panics: "Bucky was *grabbing his dick oh no oh no"* (Reioka, 2017, emphasis in original). He "scrabbl[es] backward" and his partner Bucky backs off. This story, along with *La Petite*

Homicide and *Parts We Keep,* offers a perspective into how unpleasant sex can be for sex-repulsed asexuals, even when they themselves choose to engage in sex. Notably, two of these stories (*Parts We Keep* and *Mutually Assured Destruction*) have an ambiguous ending; in both cases, Tony is still with his partner by the end, but there appear to be enduring emotional consequences to the attempted sex. *For Us*, the story in which John coerces Sherlock into sex, has an even less positive ending, as it ends with Sherlock not having recovered from this assault. This is particularly noteworthy because fanfiction is so prone to providing happy endings for its readers. The lack of such happy endings in these stories of asexual sex highlights the unpleasantness of sex for these asexual characters.

The last two stories that contain negative sexual experiences (InTheShadows, 2019b; usedupshiver, 2017) both depict Tony as an incubus: a demon or vampire-like creature who, in most fanfiction depictions, requires sex or sexual energy in order to survive. In these two stories, this puts the asexual incubus in a complicated position: Tony is forced by his biology to seek out sexual stimulus, while his asexual inclinations make this unwanted and unpleasant. In *Oh Darling, There's Nothing Traditional About You* (InTheShadows, 2019b), a story that falls into the *Asexual Sex* and *Asexual Relationship* categories, Tony has had to seek out sex for "meals", despite it being "not something he particularly enjoys". When he finds himself sharing a bed with his fellow superhero and close friend Bucky, he decides to "do something nice in thanks" by initiating sex with Bucky. They kiss, which is "nice. Safe". In fact, Tony enjoys kissing so much that he wonders if "this is what everyone meant when they talked of the joys of sex". However, he begins to hesitate when the kissing turns into making-out. Throughout the make-out, Tony is anxiously planning in his head: "Maybe if he gives Bucky a hand job? […] Or a blow job? […] That would be enough wouldn't it?". Bucky becomes aroused while Tony

"shudders" in response to the increased sexual intimacy. Eventually, Bucky picks up on Tony's lack of enthusiasm and offers to stop; Tony responds with "I'm an incubus remember? We are always ready for a good time". Thus, he is caught between his positions as an incubus and an asexual; one part of him is meant to make him highly sexual, while another part of him makes him uninterested in sex. This conundrum is articulated by Tony when he says "maybe it's fine for other people not to be all that into sex, but I'm an *incubus* […] what good is an incubus who isn't into sex?" (InTheShadows, 2019, emphasis in original).

In *Human Moment* (usedupshiver, 2017), Tony is also portrayed as an incubus and paired with Bucky, who is human. In this story, mythical creatures such as incubi are common, and a "full-blooded human" is rare; Bucky makes his living by selling "all the things only a human body can offer", including sex work for incubi such as Tony. The story opens with Bucky commenting that "that's never happened before"—it becomes clear that Tony came to him for sex but was not able to maintain an erection. Tony leaves quickly but returns three weeks later looking "pale and drawn"; as an incubus, he is suffering physically from a lack of sex. Bucky agrees to try having sex again and tries to turn Tony on. He decides to give him a blow job, but Tony does not respond well. He tenses up and is again unable to attain an erection despite receiving oral sex. When his breathing takes on a "panicky pitch", Bucky decides to stop and offers Tony coffee instead. Later, Tony states that he feels "fucked up" because he is unable to have sex; he also states "I'm half demon and it's still the human part of me that makes me a monster" (usedupshiver, 2017). This shows how both stories that depict an asexual incubus play with the notion of the "monster". Although it is traditionally the incubus who is seen as the monster, the incubus here instead appears to symbolize the sex drive that society expects each individual to have. The asexual becomes the real monster by defying these sexual drives.

However, by the end of the story, this notion of asexual-as-monster is neutralized by the acceptance of Bucky, who presents the possibility of a sexless but still fulfilled life in which the incubus feeds off other kinds of intimacy, such as non-sexual physical contact.

Both stories that depict Tony as an incubus show attempts at sex, but no completed sex acts. They are also both able to depict at least somewhat happy endings, where Tony is reassured by Bucky that he is not a monster. This fits into the pattern of the other four stories that depict negative sex experiences for asexual characters. When the sex is halted in time, a happy ending is not precluded; the longer the asexual character has to suffer through sex, the less they are able to achieve a happy ending for themselves.

Pleasant Sex

Asexual characters can also be interested in or even enthusiastic about sex. This is less common than sex-repulsion, but the possibility was still referred to or explored in 14 of the 100 stories. Asexual characters identify a number of reasons to have sex despite being asexual, such as that orgasms are fun (SailorChibi, 2017b; TenSpencerRiedPlease, 2015), that sex "helps me unwind" (SmartKIN, 2017), or that they experience a libido even if they do not experience sexual attraction (TenSpencerReidPlease, 2016a). Several stories describe asexual characters as able to engage in sex for the sake of a partner, or as unmotivated to initiate, but as still enjoying sex when a partner does (ElizabethisjustaKitten, 2019; flailingmuse, 2016; tocourtdisaster, 2013), or that they are willing to engage in sex so long as it is with the right partner (pasiphile, 2014; Iwantthatcoat, 2013).

What does pleasant sex look like for asexual characters? In some cases, it does not appear to look that different from sex had by non-asexual characters. Two of the stories that fell into the

Asexual Sex category were also in the *Label-Only* category, meaning that the story referred to asexuality in the tags but did not explore it as a theme of the story. The story *In The Body* (aceofhearts61, 2012) depicts Sherlock engaging in a lengthy tantric masturbation session in which he has multiple orgasms. Other than the story's tags, there is no indication in the story that Sherlock is asexual and no discussion of how this would influence the way he has sex or masturbates. The story *Hands That Bleed* (cleflink, 2013) focuses on a sexual experience between Sherlock and John. When John sustains a minor injury, Sherlock deduces that John is aroused by blood. He initiates a session of kinky sex in which he cuts John until John orgasms. No mention is made of Sherlock's asexuality, though it is worth noting that Sherlock does not appear to have initiated the sex for his own sexual benefit. Thus, these two stories appear to depict asexual characters having pleasurable, wanted sex that does not necessarily differ from experiences that could be had by non-asexual characters. However, neither instance of sex here is "typical" partnered sex, where the pleasure of both partners is roughly equally important.

This trend is continued in two stories that do address asexuality in somewhat more depth. In *A Helping Hand* (pasiphile, 2014), Molly's friend Sherlock is helping him do medical research in her pathology lab. Molly, from whose perspective the story is written, is fascinated by Sherlock's hands and gets aroused. When Sherlock notices, he offers to tie her up and bring her to orgasm. She agrees, and he fingers her until she orgasms multiple times, to Molly's pleasure and satisfaction. When he unties her, she assumes that she is expected to return the favour. However, she finds that Sherlock is not erect, and asks him "You didn't enjoy it?". Sherlock, however, tells her he rarely gets erect, saying "Don't take it personally. And it doesn't mean that I didn't enjoy it". He adds that she's "quite entertaining", and Molly reflects that she is not sure whether to interpret that as flattering or insulting (pasiphile, 2014). Thus, in this story, the

asexual character's sex is entirely focused on his partner. Sherlock does find enjoyment in this himself, but apparently not *sexual* enjoyment. Similarly, the story *What He Made of Me* (MiladyPheonix, 2019b) shows Sherlock engaging in sex for his partner's pleasure. This story focuses on Sherlock exploring various kinks that John is into through a series of "experiments", bringing John pleasure through acts of bondage and sadomasochism. The story relates that "Sherlock had no personal interest in sex to speak of but he was personally very interested in John Watson"; thus, it seems that Sherlock, as an asexual character, is only interested in sex because John is interested in sex. Sherlock is an "attentive and caring partner" in these experiments. Although Sherlock is not sexually stimulated by what happens and is "incapable of sexual arousal", he nevertheless is "as mentally and emotionally stimulated as if he'd just cum himself" (MiladyPheonix, 2019b). Thus, these two stories show how asexual characters can engage in sex despite not being personally interested in sex, because they are interested in their partner's sexual experience.

Compared to stories that depict unpleasant sex, stories that depict pleasant sex are much more likely to be pornographic, focusing on the pleasure produced by sex and employing language intended to titillate. This may also explain why each story has a limited focus on the implications of asexuality; two of the above described stories do not mention it at all, and the other two devote only a few sentences to outlining the experience of the asexual character. However, it becomes clear from these stories that there are reasons for asexual characters to seek out sex, such as their own physical pleasure (aceofhearts61, 2012) or their partner's pleasure (cleflink, 2013; MiladyPheonix, 2019b; pasiphile, 2014).

Complicated Sex

As discussed above, sex for asexual characters can be extremely unpleasant, or quite

pleasant. Several stories narrow in on these different possibilities by showcasing how sex for

asexual characters can be complicated, prompting both positive and negative feelings. In *On the*

Biology of Arousal (HanilarLion, 2014), Sherlock is usually not at all interested in sex. He

occasionally gets an erection, but normally "would ignore the problem, and eventually it would

go away", or he would masturbate as efficiently as possible to get rid of "the problem" instead.

On this occasion, however, he walks in on John masturbating and becomes highly aroused. He

goes to his room and masturbates, and enjoys himself this time: "Normally, this wasn't

pleasurable […] Now, however, he didn't want the sensations zinging thorugh his nerve endings

to cease". Thus, Sherlock now experiences sexual pleasure for the first time. However, this

pleasure also comes paired with uncertainty and negative feelings, as Sherlock feels that his body

is "woefully out of his control". Earlier in the story, he had reflected on his conviction that the

desire to masturbate meant that he "had not yet managed to fully master his body" (HanilarLion,

2014). Thus, this story shows an asexual character engaging in pleasurable sex, but it also

forefronts the negative and ambiguous feelings Sherlock has toward sex and masturbation.

The story *More Than a Spectator (Don't Make Me Compete)* (InTheShadows, 2019a)

shows a similar combination of pleasure and doubt. In this story, Tony is again portrayed as an

incubus. He is in a polyamorous relationship with fellow superheroes Steve and Loki, who do

not know he is an incubus or that he is asexual. In this case, Tony "feeds" his incubus instincts

by watching his two partners have sex, without engaging in sex himself. Although he enjoys this,

he is also conflicted. There are aspects of sex that he finds unpleasant, such as getting an

erection—which is "uncomfortable"—or having to deal with bodily fluids. Tony describes his

relationship with sex as "complicated" and a "chore", particularly before he was with his current boyfriends (InTheShadows, 2019a). Thus, although sex certainly can feel good to Tony in this story, it also induces a complicated set of feelings.

In other cases, sex is mostly experienced as boring by the asexual characters. This is alluded to in multiple stories (e.g. andrea_deer, 2017; Cumberbatch Critter, 2016; miniongrin, 2014; SailorChibi, 2018). In *Conflagrate* (dreamlittleyo, 2012), this experience of sex-as-boring leads to conflict. John and Sherlock regularly have sex that focuses on John's pleasure. When John offers to give Sherlock a handjob, Sherlock reminds John "You cannot be offended if I find the process tedious". However, when he cannot give Sherlock an orgasm, John's pride and feelings are hurt, leading to arguments (dreamlittleyo, 2012). They eventually reconcile, but the story shows how sex can be a cause of conflict within a relationship between an asexual and non-asexual character, even when the two partners have found a way to reconcile their differences into a mostly-pleasant sex life.

The final *Asexual Sex* story affirms the complexities of asexual sex that are visible in the other stories. *This Heart is a Stone* (Elster, 2011) depicts Sherlock as a woman and chronicles her sex life throughout multiple partnerships. In these partnerships, Sherlock variously finds sex "largely overrated", "comfortable and pleasant", and "awkward. Unnecessary". In one relationship, Sherlock initially enjoys the sex, which in that relationship feels like "hand-to-hand combat in a psychological war […] she was winning", but later she comes to find it "absurd" and becomes "disgusted and bored". Finally, Sherlock begins a relationship with John, with whom she cannot imagine having sex; picturing him naked is "not all that exciting" to her, but she still wants a long life with him as her partner. This story shows the complicated feelings that asexual characters have toward sex, even when they are not necessarily sex-repulsed.

Evaluating Asexual Characters' Sex Lives

On the topic of asexual characters and sex, the discourse of asexual fanfiction shows a high diversity of possible outcomes. In some cases, Tony and Sherlock in their asexual depictions actively seek out sex and find pleasure in it, either because it is personally pleasurable or because it pleases their partner. In other cases, the sex is highly unpleasant, from stories of sexual coercion to asexual characters forcing themselves to endure sexual situations they find disgusting or frightening. Between these two poles lies a wealth of possibilities, including boring sex, ambivalent feelings toward sex, and sex that leads to relationship conflicts.

In its FAQ, the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) highlights these differing possibilities as well (AVEN, 2020b). They note that asexual individuals may be "sex-favorable", with an "openness to finding ways to enjoy sexual activity", as well as "sex-indifferent" when they do not enjoy sex but it also does not distress them, or "sex-averse/sex-repulsed" when they have a "distressed or visceral reaction" to the idea of sex or to actual sexual situations (AVEN, 2020b). Each of these possibilities is reflected in this sample, highlighting again the close relationship between the discourse of asexuality in fanfiction and the activist discourses that are visible in AVEN's educational material.

These stories also affirm the notion that asexuality, in fanfiction discourse, generally cannot be boiled down to "disliking sex" even though some stories posit this as the definition of asexuality (see Chapter 5). Instead, asexual characters' attitudes towards and experiences with sex paint a complicated picture, highlighting the diversity in how asexuality is experienced.

Conclusions and Future Research

Although asexual activism and awareness efforts have been growing over the past two decades, asexual people for now remain a relatively invisible group in research and in popular culture. In this thesis, I have studied the depiction of asexuality in fanfiction in order to study pop cultural representations of asexuality and increase scholarly understanding of the experiences of asexuals. To this end, I analyzed 100 fan-written stories about asexual depictions of Sherlock Holmes and Tony Stark using content analysis and discourse analysis.

In my content analysis, I showed that a number of common story categories appear repeatedly in the sample, with differences between the two characters that appear to stem from their contrasting approaches to sexuality within their source texts. Sherlock, an unsociable man with little interest in romance, lends himself well as a character to stories in which asexuality is labelled but not explored (*Label-Only*). Tony Stark, a rich playboy, is more likely to appear in stories where asexuality is linked to personal realization or to coming out (*Realization/Coming Out*) or to be used as a vehicle for explaining asexuality to readers (*Informative*). For both characters, romance stories are popular (*Asexual Relationship*) and both characters are occasionally depicted in sexual situations (*Asexual Sex*). The sample contained a diversity of stories, including a number of stories that defied categories or offered alternative approaches to common tropes (*Subversive*). I also showed that it is common for asexual characters to be referred to as "broken" or a "freak", and that the sample contained multiple approaches to sex, such as sex-positive and sex-negative views held by the asexual characters.

In my discourse analysis, I showed that the discursive possibilities of asexuality are broad. Definitions of asexuality vary, although the most popular definition is "a lack of sexual attraction". This definition competes with notions of asexuality as a lack of interest in sex or an

inability to become physically aroused. The boundaries of what asexuality is or is not can be fluid, with stories offering contradicting or overlapping descriptions. One aspect of the discursive formation of asexuality is its clear distinction from what many authors of fanfiction call aromanticism: a lack of romantic attraction or romantic interest. Asexual characters are not usually aromantic—indeed, most fanfiction depicts asexual characters as having the same degree of romantic desire that might be expected from a non-asexual character, and *Asexual Relationship* was the most common story type in the sample.

I also showed that asexuality is associated with negative emotions such as guilt and shame, as well as positive emotions such as joy and pride. Primarily, negative emotions occurred when the asexual character did not understand his own sexual difference or in the face of (potential) rejection by others. By contrast, positive emotions appeared when the character had a self-realization of asexuality or was accepted by others. These two sets of emotions often combined into negative-to-positive story arcs reminiscent of Rebirth plots (Booker, 2004) and personal narratives of change (DeGloma, 2010). The depth of both positive and negative emotions felt by asexual characters belies the stereotypical view that asexual individuals are akin to robots (MacInnis & Hodson, 2012). Instead, I argued that this finding highlights the importance of including information about asexuality in sexual education curricula, in order to increase asexual young people's self-understanding and improve societal acceptance for asexual people.

My finding that the discursive formation of asexuality is explicitly separated from aromanticism is also reflected in the high volume of stories about asexual characters in relationships. Although many stories show asexual characters in established, happy relationships, many other stories highlight the possible role of asexuality as a source of relationship conflict.

Often, the asexual character has a history of one or more relationships that failed due to

asexuality. Despite this, asexual romance stories in the sample almost always have happy

endings. Multiple possibilities are present for an asexual character to find a sexless relationship,

such as finding a partner who is also asexual, finding a partner who is uninterested in sex for

other reasons, or asking a partner to remain celibate. The latter choice is often presented as

positive within the story. This contrasts with the relationship histories in which asexual

characters experienced breakups due to a partner's unwillingness to be celibate. This tension

opens up the possibility that stories underrepresent the reality of relationship conflict for asexual

individuals, which is hinted at in characters' relationship histories but underexplored as a theme.

In my exploration of asexual characters' sex lives, I found once again that diverse stories

were told. The possibilities of sex for asexual characters range from dark stories about sexual

coercion to positive stories that focus on pleasure and connection between partners. Between

these two poles lie the possibilities of half-hearted or boring sex, as well as sex that is

pleasurable but also evokes self-doubt or other complicated sets of emotions. This highlights the

fact that asexuality can not only represent a notion of a character having no relationship with sex

and sexuality—which is true in some stories—but can also represent relationships with sex that

are pleasant or complicated.

Each theme of my discourse analysis highlights the connections between fanfiction

discourses about asexuality and activist and sexologist discourses. The advocacy work of the

Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) in particular appears to be strongly

connected to how asexuality functions discursively within fanfiction. However, the stories also

highlight the diversity of asexual experiences and the difficulty in arriving at a single definition,

experience or identificatory practice that all characters or individuals who relate in some way to

asexuality can agree on. Although individual stories often do not echo the work of asexuality studies scholars, the sample nevertheless parallels the findings of asexuality scholars such as Meghan Milks and KJ Cerankowski (2014) and Ela Przybylo (2019), who suggest that asexuality can function as a perspective on societal perceptions of sex and sexuality (Przybylo, 2019). In the case of asexual fanfiction, I believe that my work in analyzing this sample highlights the variety of experiences that have become linked to the term "asexuality". These various experiences, often underrepresented in traditional media, may resonate with a wide audience of individuals whose own experiences of sex, sexuality and relationships currently find very little reflection in storytelling.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on two popular characters in fandom who have contrasting approaches to sexuality and physicality in their original depiction. The choice of these two characters enabled comparison between the two halves of the sample and an analysis of how differences between these two halves were informed by the original depictions of the characters. However, limiting the sample to only two characters also has disadvantages. Fan writers develop standards and conventions for fanfiction, within fandom as a whole but also within specific fandoms (Coppa, 2017). Therefore, focusing on only two fandoms may obscure conventions in asexual writing that are apparent in other fandoms. The choice to use only two fanfiction websites—AO3 and FF.net—means that fanfiction on other sites, such as LiveJournal or Tumblr, was likewise excluded from the sample. It is therefore possible that other discursive possibilities surrounding asexuality were not identified in this thesis. However, AO3 and FF.net are some of the largest and most influential fanfiction websites and form many people's entry-point into the

world of fanfiction. In addition, the two characters of note are some of the most popular characters to be depicted as asexual. Therefore, I believe this thesis provides an examination of the aspects of asexual discourse with which fans are most likely to interact.

Another disadvantage of the two characters that I selected is the limited ability to study racial dynamics in the depiction of asexuality in fanfiction. Because both characters are white men, the discourse I studied focuses on white, male asexuality. It is plausible that many of the authors are women or non-binary, and that at least some authors are people of color; these authors' perspectives on asexuality may be reflected in the work, even when the main character is male and white. However, as Benjamin Woo (2017) notes, the ideology of media fandom is white, despite the fact that fans of color make up a substantial portion of fandom. Studying racialized understandings of asexuality could occur through the study of asexual characters of color in fanfiction—possibly including a direct comparison to white asexual characters—in conjunction with sociological research into the experiences of asexual people of color.

This work may offer potential insight into the role that asexual fanfiction plays for its authors and readers. However, the study did not include interviews or other research methods that allowed for strong conclusions into issues such as authorial intent and audience reception. Future scholarly work on the topic of asexual fanfiction should engage more directly with fans through interviews or other participant-based research. Although relationships between fans and scholars can be fraught (see Hill, 2002), my contact with authors—to obtain author permissions—suggests that many authors are open to sharing their knowledge and experiences with scholars of fandom. Such research would offer valuable insights that would help connect the discursive formation of asexuality in fanfiction to other discourses of asexuality in which authors' and readers' asexual experiences take place.

Despite its limitations, the work in this thesis offers an important contribution to the fields of both asexuality studies and fandom studies. Asexuality is underrepresented in popular culture, but it is not *un*represented. As this study shows, asexual fanfiction shows the importance of fan writing in providing an opportunity to examine how marginalized sexualities are imagined in fictional depictions. My sample of fanfiction also highlights the complexities and nuanced possibilities of asexual experience. This study contributes to increasing the visibility of asexuality—a complicated and nuanced set of experiences, the recognition of which can bring increased understanding to those with whom it resonates.

Appendix

This appendix contains the references for all works of fanfiction that are in the sample but are not referred to in the text. In fanfiction communities, capitalization of all words, no words, or only the first word of a fanfiction title is considered a stylistic choice. Therefore, I maintain the original capitalization in all usernames and in titles of all works of fanfiction in this appendix.

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Note. In fanfiction communities, capitalization of all words, no words, or only the first word of a

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