

## Positive Representations of Asexuality in Contemporary Young Adult by Smangaliso Simelane

### Abstract

According to Stacy Pinto, asexuality is one of the most under-researched, misunderstood, under-represented sexual identities of the 21st century (331) despite the fact that there currently exists—a small social movement, perhaps akin to the gay rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which has brought together a diverse group of people who identify as asexual (Bogaert 244). Due to the limited awareness of asexuality, relatively few asexual characters exist in literature and even fewer could be considered examples of positive representation. Instead, asexual representations in media tend to serve as—denial narratives (Przybylo 189) which invalidate the asexual identity and render asexuality illegible. The absence of positive asexual characters can have an alienating effect on those who identify as asexual and find themselves in a culture which promotes sexuality as a necessary part of human existence. A rise in fantasy novels that feature asexual protagonists may challenge the trend of asexual erasure and problematize prevailing notions of human sexuality. In the following thesis I investigate how the fantasy genre can facilitate the awareness and normalisation of asexual identities. This will be done by introducing and contextualising asexuality before discussing the effects of past negative representations of asexual characters in literature and popular media. Following this, I analyse two contemporary young adult fantasy novels, namely *Clariel* by Garth Nix and *Quicksilver* by RJ Anderson, that feature positively portrayed asexual characters to determine how the fantasy elements and concepts such as identification with the protagonist (Varsam 205) effectively depathologizes queerness.

Literature can influence the beliefs and behaviours of readers. Used correctly, it serves as an effective vehicle for combating negative stereotypes and inspiring cognitive changes. One of the ways literature achieves this is by encouraging the reader to identify with a protagonist who exposes them to new perspectives. Examples of this can be found in the recent bubbling of young adult fantasy novels

which provide positive representations of queer identities. To explore this further, I shall be investigating how the fantasy genre effectively uses the reader's identification with the protagonist to make commentary on and affect the real world. This will be done by analysing *Clariel* by Garth Nix, a novel which features an asexual heroine who, rather than being pathologized, is given a sympathetic narrative that allows one to relate to her experience.

To begin this exploration, one must first understand the mimetic qualities of literature. Plato described art as a form of mimesis which represents nature. This can be illustrated by borrowing a metaphor proposed by Keith Oatley which compares literature to a computer simulation. Just as a computer can run simulations based on models of reality, so too does the human mind run literary simulations of fictional realities when reading. Oatley claims that during these literary simulations our "emotions do not just mirror those of the character. Though the plan is simulated, the emotions are our own" (68-9). Hence, through literature, one can sympathise with and take on the feelings of the characters created by the author. This sympathetic link allows identification to occur, a process whereby the reader "empathizes with the character and adopts the character's identity" (Cohen 252). Identification, especially with protagonists, can have long-lasting ramifications. According to John Tchernev "identification involves taking the perspective of someone else, and therefore perhaps seeing a new viewpoint on an issue. This can lead to changes in the audience member's subsequent attitudes and behaviours" (7). To bolster his case, Tchernev references Michael Slater *et al* who theorize that persuasive narratives "may lead to at least temporary acceptance of values and beliefs that represent a shift from the individual's existing beliefs" (5-6). Similar conclusions are drawn by Anneke de Graaf who claims that "as identifying readers simulate or imagine the events that happen to a character in their imagination, they may gain greater understanding of what it is like to experience the described events and beliefs may be influenced accordingly" (77). De Graaf *et al* demonstrate this in a 2012 study where participants were given a story in which the perspectivizing character was either for or against euthanasia. The results revealed that after reading, the participants were more likely to side with the perspectivizing character of the version they had received. Drawing

on this data, de Graaf insists that “identification was responsible for the influence on attitudes. When readers identify with a character, their attitudes shift in the direction of the ones implied by the character” (77). Based on these claims, I argue that identification can be a vital tool for introducing a plethora of minority or marginalised communities to the public and normalising their experiences. To demonstrate my argument, I shall investigate how identification used in contemporary young adult fantasy novels effectively depathologizes asexual identities.

According to Stacy Pinto, “asexuality is one of the most under-researched, misunderstood, under-represented sexual identities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (331). This is despite the existence of “a small social movement, perhaps akin to the gay rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which has brought together a diverse group of people who identify as asexual” (Anthony Bogaert 244). Studies in Britain have revealed that between 0.4% (Catherine Aicken *et al* 125) and 1% (Bogaert 242) of the population experiences no attraction to any gender, a trait of asexuality which has been pathologized both medically and in popular culture. Nicole Prause *et al* point out that an asexual “seeking guidance from a clinician may be diagnosed with hypoactive sexual desire disorder or sexual aversion disorder, or may be referred for medical evaluation” (342). Furthermore, in literature and other forms of media, relatively few asexual characters can be found and only a small percentage of those could be considered examples of positive representations. Ela Przybylo has investigated portrayals of asexuality and highlighted the negative stereotypes that can be found in media such as the medical drama “House” where the titular Doctor House maintains that it is impossible for his patient to be asexual. Similarly, examples of asexuality in past literature are dominated by characters such as Marty South of *The Woodlanders* who, according to Shanta Dutta, is built up as “an asexual, almost disembodied creature, with no human desires or frailties” (74) and Mary Turner of *The Grass is Singing* who Meral Çileli claims is plagued by a “wish to disprove that she is asexual” (72). Such portrayals, Przybylo argues, serve as “denial narratives” (189) that invalidate asexual identities and render asexuals illegible. Hence, the absence of positive asexual characters can have an alienating effect on those who identify as asexual and find themselves stuck in a society which

enforces compulsory heterosexuality. Additionally, denial narratives also propagate stereotypes, reinforce sexual assumptions and feed the popular belief that sexual attraction is a necessary part of being human. This can have a harmful influence on the behaviours of people, as seen in an article by Dominique Mosbergen which contains accounts of asexuals being disbelieved, viewed as less than human and subjected to corrective rape.

Since the turn of the millennium there has been a rise in the number of young adult fantasy novels which push back against asexual denial narratives. This includes texts such as *Quicksilver* by RJ Anderson, *Every Heart a Doorway* by Seanan McGuire and *Banner of the Damned* by Sherwood Smith. I argue that this influx is made possible by the fantasy genre's ability to serve as a particularly potent means of identification capable of inspiring changes in the attitudes and real-world beliefs of readers. To elucidate, I look to Plato's student Aristotle who once claimed that in effective mimesis there must be some distance between the depicted world and reality as this "allows us to learn from representation, whereas we might respond emotionally to the actual experience" (Matthew Potolsky 37). One of the ways this can be achieved is through defamiliarization. This is a term coined by Viktor Shklovsky and is described by Julie Kaomea as a technique employed by art which forces one to "look at a familiar object or text with an exceptionally high level of awareness" (15), thus vividly renewing one's view of reality. Shklovsky claims that when one becomes habituated to the world they perceive it tends to automatically enter the unconscious. Thus, familiarity can make sensation unobtainable and cause one to be incapable of 'seeing'. According to Shklovsky, a function of art is to turn the familiar unfamiliar and, in doing so, once again "make the stone stony" (162). Fantasy is particularly adept at providing defamiliarized worlds which serve as reflections of our own reality in ways which do not simply mirror real life but instead dynamically transform certain aspects. The depicted worlds are made strange through the author's reimagining of time, space, physical laws and other dimensions. However, they often retain enough of an analogous relationship to ours for meaningful parallels to be drawn. Therefore, when one is engaged in a fantasy literary simulation where they identify with the protagonist, cognitive changes inspired in the fictional world can be brought into

ours. As seen in the lessons one can learn from the treatment of house elves in *Harry Potter* or the greed of Smaug in *The Hobbit*, fantasy has constantly achieved the feat of balancing the familiar with the unfamiliar and consequently admitting readers a safe emotional distance to engage with certain aspects of reality.

To demonstrate this, I turn to *Clariel*, the fourth entry in Garth Nix's "Old Kingdom" series. Within the literary simulation provided by the text, readers are introduced to the eponymous Clariel, a seventeen-year-old girl who has moved with her family to Belisaire. Despite expectations for her to join the Academy and be apprenticed in a trade like her parents, she wants nothing more than to "live in the Great Forest, be a Borderer, and be left alone!" (102). Her constant craving for independence makes her an especially identifiable protagonist for the teen and young adult target audience and imbues her with relatable characteristics that assist in making her a sympathetic character. Inspiring sympathy is a necessary step in the process of identification because, as Oatley claims, "in sympathy a mental link is made to another person" (61). This mental link between reader and fictional character can be exploited to open possibilities for greater empathy both in the literary simulation and in the real world. As Oatley puts it, "your sympathy comes to rest first with one character then another - and by these means your emotional understandings are extended. Those aspects of the self that are imported through the membrane are enlarged by understandings of people in the imagined world and then, perhaps, also of people in the ordinary world" (61). Therefore, by being relatable and sympathetic, *Clariel* allows the reader to identify with her and thereby introduces an asexual perspective that might otherwise remain illegibly foreign. The asexual aspects of Clariel's identity are revealed through her interactions with some of the male characters who proposition her, forcing her to reveal that she's "just not... not interested in men" (251) or "women either" (251). As previously stated, however, the mimeses of literary simulations benefit from maintaining some distance between themselves and the real world. The fantasy elements of Nix's novel do this in an ingeniously subtle manner. Clariel's struggle for independence, for example, is made strange through her insistence on mastering the dangerous powers of Free

Magic instead of the Charter Magic pushed onto her. Likewise, her asexual experience also incorporates fantasy elements. She starts off feeling out of place in Belisaire and opposes her arranged marriage to the Governor of Belisaire's son. When she tries explaining herself to her father, she is told that she is too young to know what she wants and simply has not "met the right young man" (42). Through this, we are introduced to the heteronormative notions held by the people around her. Much like real life, there is an expectation for people to remain within the confines of heterosexuality, thus when Clariel reminds her father that her aunt never married anyone, he claims she is "not a *usual* person" (42). To combat this, Clariel strives to return to the Great Forest where she intends to live in solitude - by her own choice, she is careful to add - and become a Borderer despite Mistress Ader's insistence that this is not a viable option "not now, perhaps not ever" (60). The Great Forest is quite literally a sanctum from the pressures of conformity in Belisaire and thus represents a place where Clariel can truly be herself. As Clariel constantly reminds the reader, she cares little for marriage or Charter Magic and feels imprisoned in the city. Parallels can be drawn between her narrative and observed trends of asexual identity formation. Nicholette Robbins *et al* have explored asexual coming out narratives and, using interviews from 225 participants, characterised it as a process beginning with identity confusion and ending with identity integration where one reaches "a stage of self-acceptance and even pride in the asexual identity regardless of their choice to come out or not. They are no longer hiding their identity from others or acceding to sexual-normative expectations" (759). The process often features the discovery of other asexuals through avenues such as online forums. This, Robbins *et al* claim, "validated their experience" (756) and assisted their exploration of self-identity. One could argue that by using the protagonist's goal to reach the Great Forest, the novel makes the asexual coming out narrative strange through fantasy. This "estrangement" (Shklovsky 152) forces the reader to, perhaps for the first time, analyse elements of compulsory heterosexuality that might have otherwise gone unnoticed when hidden behind the mundaneness of everyday life. It is much harder to ignore the insidious heteronormative pressures of real life when they are overtly represented as an arranged marriage in a fantasy world of magic. There-

fore, by allowing the reader to identify with Clariel and experience her journey of self-realization the asexual identity is made legible which consequently opens possibilities for increased empathy and acceptance. This experience is mediated by fantasy elements that create a comfortable emotional remove and make these ideas more readily digestible. There is evidence that the cognitive changes inspired by narratives such as these have consequences outside of literary simulations. Cohen argues that “identifying with media others allows us to experience social reality from other perspectives and, thus, shapes the development of self-identity and social attitudes” (246). Alfredo Martínez-Expósito demonstrates this in their investigation of how literature in Spain has contributed to the normalisation of LGBT identities. Similarly, positive portrayals of asexuality, such as in *Clariel*, may challenge assumptions about human sexuality and catalyse the mainstream acceptance of asexuality.

It is important to have a diverse range of identities depicted in media. Alice Walker once wrote that “models, in art, in behaviour in growth of spirit and intellect – even if rejected – enrich and enlarge one’s view of existence” (69). *Clariel* does this by providing a positively represented asexual character that validates the identity, negates stereotypes and debunks the illegibility implied by denial narratives. As I have demonstrated, this is achieved by, firstly, establishing a literary simulation. The simulation uses the fantasy genre to estrange reality and shed light on aspects of society that, through familiarity, tend to be invisible. Within the simulation the reader is introduced to an identifiable protagonist who allows them to empathize with her asexual experience. From this, it is apparent that good fantasy literature is more than just the product of an overactive imagination. Instead, it holds up a mirror to reality, reveals flaws with stark clarity and expands the boundaries of our empathy.

### Works Cited

Aicken, Catherine., Mercer, Catherine., Cassell, Jackie. “Who Reports Absence of Sexual Attraction in Britain? Evidence from National Probability Surveys.” *Psychology & Sexuality* 4.2 (2013): 121-135.

- Bogaert, Anthony. "Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Asexuality." *Review of General Psychology* 10.3 (2006): 241-250.
- Çileli, Meral. "Denial of Sexuality and Gender Roles in Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*." *Atenea* 21 (2001): 65-75.
- Cohen, Jonathan. "Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters." *Mass Communication & Society* 4.3 (2001): 245-264.
- De Graaf, Anneke, Hoeken, Hans., Sanders, José., Beentjes Johannes. "Identification as a Mechanism of Narrative Persuasion." *Communication Research* 39.6 (2012): 802-823.
- De Graaf, Anneke. "The Effectiveness of Adaptation of the Protagonist in Narrative Impact: Similarity Influences Health Beliefs Through Self-Referencing." *Human Communication Research* 40.1 (2014): 73-90.
- Dutta, Shanta. "*The Woodlanders*." *Ambivalence in Hardy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. 73-91.
- Kaomea, Julie. "Reading Erasures and Making the Familiar Strange: Defamiliarizing Methods for Research in Formerly Colonized and Historically Oppressed Communities." *Educational Researcher* 32.2 (2003): 14-23.
- Martínez-Expósito, Alfredo. "Queer Literature in Spain: Pathways to Normalisation." *Culture & History Digital Journal* 2.1 (2013): 01-9.
- Mosbergen, Dominique. "Battling Asexual Discrimination, Sexual Violence and 'Corrective' Rape." 38 pars. 27 April 2018. <[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/entry/sexual-discrimination\\_n\\_3380551](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/entry/sexual-discrimination_n_3380551)>.
- Nix, Garth. *Clariel*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014.
- Oatley, Keith. "A Taxonomy of the Emotions of Literary Response and a Theory of Identification in Fictional Narrative." *Poetics* 23.1-2 (1995): 53-74.
- Pinto, Stacy Anne. "ASEXUally: On Being an Ally to the Asexual Community." *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counselling* 8.4 (2014): 331-43.
- Plato. *The Laws*. Translated by Trevor J. Saunders. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979.
- Potolsky, Matthew. "Aristotle's *Poetics*." *Mimesis*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 32-7.



Prause, Nicole, and Cynthia A. Graham. "Asexuality: Classification and Characterization." *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 36.3 (2007): 341-356.

Przybylo, Ela. "Introducing Asexuality, Unthinking Sex." *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*. Ed. Nancy L. Fischer and Steven Seidman. New York: Routledge, 2016. 181-91.

Robbins, Nicolette, Low, Kathryn., Query, Anna. "A Qualitative Exploration of the 'Coming Out' Process for Asexual Individuals." *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 45.3 (2016): 751-760.

Schipper, Edith Watson. "Mimesis in the Arts in Plato's *Laws*." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 22.2 (1963): 199-202.

Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art, as Device." Ed. Alexandra Berlina. *Poetics Today* 36.3 (2015): 151-174.

Slater, Michael, Rouner, Donna. "Entertainment-Education and Elaboration Likelihood: Understanding the Processing of Narrative Persuasion." *Communication Theory* 12.2 (2002): 173-191.

Tchernev, John Martin. "Creating and Maintaining Identification with Characters in Narrative Films: The Impact of Protagonist Motivations and Key Story Moments on Real-Time Audience Identification and Liking." *The Ohio State University* (2015): 01-136.

Walker, Alice. "Saving the Life that is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life." *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984. 03-14.