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**GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. CULTURE.
ASEXUALITY IN REPRESENTATION AND
RECEPTION**

Petra Filipová



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**Doctoral Programme in Modern Languages and Literatures
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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the 21st century, asexuality has been a point of interest both for researchers and for the communities of people who have claimed this orientation. Having gained visibility in the past decade, some asexual characters have emerged on US television. Due to the relevance of fictional characters in popular culture as possible role models for the creation of people's gender and sexual identities, it is necessary to examine the available representation of asexuality as a newly described sexual orientation. Asexual men have been chosen for the analysis for two reasons: first, based on the available research, it is predicted that sex has a greater impact on the creation of masculinities than the creation of femininities. Second, female asexual characters are mostly absent from current US television fiction. Through the application of theoretical knowledge on asexuality and masculinity, this thesis aims to examine how asexual men can create their identities on the basis of television role models, i.e. to answer the following research questions: Do asexual men face more difficulty in constructing their masculine identities than non-asexual men? Are asexual men forced to excessively employ those aspects of masculine identities that are not connected to sexuality to construct or reaffirm their masculinities, or do they perform heterosexuality in order to do so? Does television fiction of the 21st century offer asexual men role models for the creation of masculine identities? In order to answer these questions, theoretical sources on masculinity and asexuality are applied to the analysis of two television shows, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) and *Dexter* (2006-2013). Both series feature a male protagonist who could be classified as asexual based on behavior, thoughts, or speech, and the comparison of characters in both sitcom and drama provides insight into the creation of asexual masculinities as presented in television.

RESUMEN

Desde los inicios del siglo XXI la asexualidad ha sido una cuestión de interés para investigadores/as y para las comunidades de individuos que se adscriben a esta orientación. Gracias a la visibilidad ganada durante la última década, han comenzado a aparecer algunos personajes asexuales en la televisión estadounidense. Debido a la relevancia de los personajes de ficción en la cultura popular como posibles modelos para la creación de identidades de género y sexuales, se hace necesario examinar las representaciones disponibles sobre la asexualidad como una orientación sexual de reciente definición. Se ha elegido a los varones asexuales como objeto de análisis por dos razones: la primera, basada en la literatura sobre el tema, es que se supone que el sexo tiene un mayor impacto en la creación de masculinidades que en la de feminidades. La segunda, que en la ficción televisiva estadounidense actual apenas hay personajes femeninos asexuales. Mediante la aplicación de una serie de teorías sobre asexualidad y masculinidad(es), esta tesis tiene como objetivo examinar cómo los hombres asexuales podrían construir su identidad sobre la base de los modelos televisivos; es decir, se propone responder a las siguientes preguntas de investigación: ¿Tienen los hombres asexuales más dificultades para construir su identidad masculina que los no asexuales? ¿Se ven los hombres asexuales obligados a emplear los aspectos no relacionados con la sexualidad en su construcción o reafirmación de identidades, o por el contrario ejercen una heterosexualidad performativa para lograrlo? ¿Ofrece la ficción televisiva del siglo XXI modelos para la creación de identidades masculinas? Para contestar a estas cuestiones, las fuentes teóricas sobre masculinidad y asexualidad se aplican al análisis de dos series televisivas: *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-actualidad) y *Dexter* (2006-2013). Ambas tienen personajes protagonistas masculinos que pueden ser clasificados como asexuales en base a comportamientos, pensamientos/ideas o diálogos, y la comparación de éstos en una comedia de situación y un drama permite profundizar en la construcción de identidades asexuales tal cual se presenta en televisión.

RESUM

Des dels inicis del segle XXI, l'asexualitat ha estat una qüestió d'interès per a investigadors/es i per a les comunitats d'individus que s'adscriuen a aquesta orientació. Gràcies a la visibilitat guanyada durant l'última dècada, han començat a aparèixer alguns personatges asexuals en productes de ficció televisiva nord-americana. A causa de la rellevància dels personatges de ficció en la cultura popular com a possibles models per a la creació d'identitats de gènere i sexuals, es fa necessari examinar les representacions disponibles sobre l'asexualitat com una orientació sexual de recent definició. S'ha triat els homes asexuals com a objecte d'anàlisi per dues raons: la primera, basada en la literatura sobre el tema, és que se suposa que el sexe té un major impacte en la creació de masculinitats que en la de feminitats. La segona, que en la ficció televisiva nord-americana actual no hi pràcticament personatges femenins asexuals. Mitjançant l'aplicació d'una sèrie de teories sobre asexualitat i masculinitat(és), aquesta tesi té com a objectiu examinar com els homes asexuals podrien construir la seva identitat sobre la base dels models televisius; és a dir, es proposa respondre a les següents preguntes de recerca: tenen els homes asexuals més dificultats per construir la seva identitat masculina que els no asexuals? Es veuen els homes asexuals obligats a emprar els aspectes no relacionats amb la sexualitat en la seva construcció o reafirmació d'identitats, o per contra exerceixen una heterosexualidad performativa per aconseguir-ho? Ofereix la ficció televisiva del segle XXI models per a la creació d'identitats masculines? Per contestar a aquestes qüestions, les fonts teòriques sobre masculinitat i asexualitat s'apliquen a l'anàlisi de dues sèries televisives: *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-actualitat) i *Dexter* (2006-2013). Ambdues tenen personatges protagonistes masculins que poden ser classificats com a asexuals sobre la base de comportaments, pensaments/idees o diàlegs, i la comparació d'aquests dins una comèdia de situació i un drama permet aprofundir en la construcció d'identitats asexuals pel que fa a la seva representació televisiva.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APA – American Psychiatric Association

AVEN – The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network

DSM – Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

HSDD – Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder

LGB – Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual

LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

LGBT+ or LGBTQIAP+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Ally, Pansexual, etc.

MOGAI – Marginalized Orientations, Genders/Gender Alignments, and Intersex

MRI – Magnetic Resonance Imaging

NSFG – National Survey of Family Growth

SONDA – New York’s Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act

INTRODUCTION

Ever since its emergence and popularization in the mid-20th century, television has played a significant part both in the way people perceive others and in the way they create their own identities. The majority of the current US population was born into households with a television and grew up consuming a wide range of programs, shows and films on dozens of national broadcasting networks. This constant consumption of television programming influences the way people perceive certain situations, minority groups or real life events, and through this, contributes to the shifting of attitudes and creation of new societal norms. Cummings and Gordon explain that “what the public sees day after day, for many hundreds of hours each year, becomes natural, a presentation of the way things are, even when those things were initially shocking to a majority and remain so for a minority of viewers” (27). In addition, television “has been lauded for raising political consciousness on issues as diverse as sexual health and global poverty [...] it has helped people to become aware of their membership of nationalities, genders and even the human race [...] it has done nothing less than change the cultural landscape” (Casey *et al.* vii). In this way, television has been instrumental in “remaking the American mainstream” since the middle of the 20th century (Cummings and Gordon 36).

It does not even matter whether viewers are aware that they are consuming a work of fiction – the overwhelming imagery of television blurs the lines between real and imagined: “awash in so many images, so much seeming information, it’s no wonder that we believe so much of what we see, even when we say we don’t. TV panders to our innate inquisitiveness and fills in the gaps in our experiences, the little we know firsthand” (Cummings and Gordon 27-28). Examining the way television fills these gaps in people’s experiences and engages in opinion-forming processes then becomes of vital importance to the understanding of contemporary US society. Of course, television does not always play an active part in creating societal change, but “even if television were not the primary cause of change, it has served as the messenger and supporter of ideas and movements, sometimes overtly and knowingly; many other times TV has had consequences that were unintended, unstated, and even unknown to those involved in its programming” (Cummings and Gordon x). After all, Stuart Hall’s theory also suggests that audiences are capable of decoding messages in various, sometimes oppositional, ways. Furthermore, the codes used both by producers and by audiences may be “so

widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed [...] but to be ‘naturally’ given” (Hall 167). Therefore, it is important to examine television production both as an active creator of public attitudes and a passive reflector of already established opinions.

It stands to reason that as much as television can influence people’s opinions of the outside world, it can just as easily reflect inwards, in the way an individual perceives him- or herself – in other words, television plays an important role in shaping the viewer’s identity. Stryker and Burke define identity as “parts of a self composed of the meanings attached by persons to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (284). While they only talk about people attaching meanings to roles, viewing specific roles consistently depicted in a certain way on television can influence the viewer’s identity formation as well. Goffman’s theory explores two types of identity, i.e. social and personal. Social identity may be defined as a societally established set of means of categorizing a person, based on “a complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” (Goffman 2). Goffman further distinguishes between virtual social identity, i.e. the demands and assumptions “as to what the individual before us ought to be” (2), and actual social identity, i.e. “the category and attributes he could in fact be proved to possess” (2). The discrepancies between these two forms of social identities, according to Goffman, might give rise to stigmas, or deeply discrediting perceptions of an individual who does not match the societal expectations for a member of a specific category: a theory which appears relevant to the discussion of negative and/or stereotypical representation of the masculinities of marginalized groups in television, seeing as the fact of belonging to a sexual minority might often create such discrepancies. In addition, Stryker and Burke point out two separate schools of thought within Identity Theory. The first focuses on the interplay and mutual influence of social structures and the structure of self; the second concentrates on the internal dynamics of the structure of self and the way the self impacts social behavior (Stryker and Burke 287). Within the context of analyzing television production, making use of the former appears more logical, seeing as it takes into consideration external social influences that shape the inner structures of self in any given individual. However, it is impossible to dismiss the latter as invalid for the study of gender within television production, considering that the intersections of identities based on gender and sexuality certainly

comprise an important part of the internal dynamics of an individual's self, and a character's behavior can be explained on the basis of internal conflict and motivations.

Elaborating on the concept of society, Stryker and Burke see it as "a mosaic of relatively durable patterned interactions and relationships, differentiated yet organized, embedded in an array of groups, organizations, communities, institutions, and intersected by crosscutting boundaries of class, ethnicity, age, gender, religion and more" (287). The way these patterned interactions are embedded in any social group results in the assumption that people have as many selves as they have groups with which they interact: i.e. an identity is a group-based self, an internal reflection of the expectations a group holds for an individual based on the position occupied in a given network of relationships (Stryker and Burke 288). An individual's identities are organized with regard to identity salience, i.e. "the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or, alternatively, as the differential probability across persons that an identity will be invoked in a given situation" (Stryker and Burke 288). That is, an identity holds as much importance as is the probability of this identity playing a central role in social interactions. The higher the salience of an identity, the higher the possibility that an individual will behave based on the expectations of this particular identity. Salience is influenced by commitment: "the degree of persons' relationships to others in their networks depends on having a particular identity and role, measurable by the costs of losing meaningful relations to others should the identity be foregone" (Stryker and Burke 288).

With the increasing frequency of discussions on feminism and gender throughout the course of the 20th century, gender identity became a category of great importance. Judith Butler, one of the most prominent contemporary theorists, explained the concept of gender performativity in her book *Gender Trouble*:

gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed [...] there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.

(33)

The performativity of Butler's explanation seems similar to the relationship between behavior and identity in Stryker's work. According to Stryker and Burke, identity – especially high salience identity – impacts behavior in that people attempt to behave in a

way that reconciles their internal perception of identity with the external situation. In Butler, gender identity impacts behavior and, at the same time, is eternally constructed by it. Furthermore, with the vast number of stereotypes about how a man or a woman should behave in any given situation, it is safe to assume that gender identity has high salience for most people, not only in the contemporary US society but across the world. Commitment levels for gender identity are constantly reinforced by men and women themselves, through criticism of other people's behavior as not manly enough or not suitable for a woman. But where feminist scholars and theorists have been articulating the pressure on women to be feminine for more than a century, the male experience of shaping one's male identity remained without explicit and detailed discussion until the 1970s, when studies of masculinity started taking shape.

With the emergence of the idea that there is a sexual orientation as opposed to mere sexual behavior, sexual identity has become an important part of the late-20th and 21st century person's identity. Television has, once again, helped shape the public opinion and acceptance of homosexuality as a sexual orientation instead of a sickness: in network shows such as *Will and Grace* (National Broadcasting Company (NBC) 1998-2006), and in cable shows like *The L Word* (Showtime 2004-2009) or *Queer as Folk* (Showtime 2000-2005), "the fact of homosexuality dominates" (Cummings and Gordon 34). As mentioned previously, television has helped shape the societal norms:

For most of us, the stigma has been removed from pregnancy before marriage, unwed mothers, homosexuality, living together, casual drug use, and other once widely condemned activities. If we as viewers participate in the medium in a way that makes us relate to the people we are watching, we may become less judgmental. We may become more tolerant and accepting of what was once considered aberrant behavior.

(Cummings and Gordon 54)

Nowadays, homosexuality is depicted on television in a wide range of interpretations, and while there are certainly some homosexual characters or homoerotic context shown in a rather stereotypical way, it is not too difficult to find a homosexual character whose portrayal reinforces acceptance and positive outlook on gay people in everyday life. Obviously, it is impossible to claim that homophobia has been erased from the 21st-century US society, but with the federal legalization of same-sex marriage in June 2015, it is safe to assume that homosexuals have become largely accepted and afforded recognition in the legal system as well as in the media.

Asexuals cannot claim the same. With the debates still going on in medical circles about whether asexuality should be recognized as an orientation – even though lately, most experts have been leaning towards an affirmative – asexuals often face ridicule, disbelief and misunderstanding when they speak about their experiences. Television tends to portray sexuality as something not only natural and good, but also as an inevitable part of life. Something that no one can live without, something that any healthy person should desire as much as possible, striving to sexually satisfy themselves and their partner(s) as well. Sexual behavior is not only tolerated and accepted on television nowadays – it is expected: “in the past sixty years we have gone from movies in which even a husband and wife could not be shown in the same bed to [...] an abundance of more or less explicit sexual programming on cable” (Cummings and Gordon 200). Where television offers at least some homosexual characters, finding an asexual character even in the most recent US shows is still incredibly difficult. Even in series that have a potentially asexual character, the creators rarely allow for explicit declarations of the character’s condition: when it happens, it is generally a female character stating she is asexual. Male characters who can be interpreted as asexual based on their behavior never openly claim this orientation for themselves. Furthermore, they do not seem to be aware of asexuality as a concept, and when directly asked, the creators of the shows will refuse to respond, or will offer an ambiguous response that does not truly answer either way. Male asexuality thus seems to be treated with slightly more disbelief, ambiguity and secrecy, leading to the presumption that constructing an identity based on asexuality and femininity might be a different process from the interplay of asexuality and masculinity. Where asexual women are often called repressed, unliberated or old-fashioned, asexual men face a more direct attack on their very identity as men. As discussed in the theoretical section of this thesis, masculinity seems much more rooted in overt performances of sexual behavior than femininity.

Through the analysis of a sample of fictional male characters, this thesis attempts to examine how asexual men shape their gender and sexual identities in contemporary US television series, i.e. shows that have been written and aired in the 21st century, seeing as asexuality has only truly come into light in the early 2000s. Furthermore, this dissertation investigates whether or not asexuality stands in direct opposition to masculinity, and how asexual behavior influences the perception of a character’s masculinity by other characters as well as the viewers of these television shows. My work aims to answer the following research questions: Do asexual men face

more difficulty in constructing their male identities than non-asexual men? Do asexual men employ those aspects of masculine identities that are not connected to heteronormative sexuality to construct or reaffirm their masculinities, or do they perform heterosexuality in order to do so? Does television fiction of the 21st century offer asexual men role models for the creation of masculine identities? By answering these questions, this dissertation intends to prove that asexual men face difficulties in the negotiation of their male identities, and that if they fail to perform (hetero)sexuality to a satisfactory degree, they are treated as less masculine and at times, less human.

The document is divided into a theoretical and an analytical part. The theory is comprised of three chapters: the first one explores the history of asexuality in medical and scientific discourse, starting in the 19th century and continuing on to the most recent works. The second chapter deals with the current debates on asexuality and masculinity in two distinct blocks: one that clarifies terminology connected to asexuality and explores the issues and stereotypes that asexuals have to deal with; another one that offers a short overview of the contemporary study of masculinity and presents key concepts further used in the analysis. The third chapter illustrates how asexuality has been presented in non-fiction US television programs such as talk shows, news programs or documentaries, and highlights the recurring stereotypes about asexual people in general and asexual men in particular.

The analytical part of the thesis focuses on two US television series of different genres. Examining the representation of asexual masculinities both in a sitcom and in drama offers a wider perspective for understanding how asexuality is portrayed in both extremes of the specter of television fiction of the 21st century. Chapters 4 and 5 use the theoretical background outlined in Chapters 1-3 to analyze the representation of asexual masculinities on contemporary US television. The former focuses on *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present), a sitcom developed for the Columbia Broadcast System (CBS) network that explores the lives of four male scientists working at a California university. The latter examines *Dexter* (2006-2013), a drama series which aired on a premium cable network Showtime and follows the adventures of Dexter Morgan, a serial killer employed by the Miami police department as a forensic analyst. Both chapters are based on a similar methodology (close reading of selected scenes), and a similar internal structure: they are divided into four sections, according to the four basic

rules of masculinity¹ first mentioned by Brannon and David in 1976 and further explored in Michael Kimmel's 2008 book *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. According to this author, the original rules have not undergone much change in the past three decades. Because of this, it is possible to utilize them when discussing the creation of asexual masculinities in the 21st century, as is done in the chapters that ensue.

¹ See section 2.2.

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF (A)SEXOLOGY

1.1 17th through 20th Centuries

The study of asexuality in general, and as a sexual orientation in particular, is a relatively new one. Despite the increase in the amount of research done on the subject in the past decade, experts have still merely scratched the surface of the issue. A brief look at the history of sexology reveals that as an acknowledged field of study, sexology itself can be considered a rather young one, despite the fact that sexual behavior has been attracting the interest of philosophers and medical professionals for centuries, if not millennia. Remembering the centuries of humanity's general fascination with its sexuality serves to establish the sexually saturated background against which the modern study of sexuality (and asexuality) is set.

According to the concise overview of the history of sexology provided by The Kinsey Institute, one of the world's best known institutions in the field, physicians and philosophers of the ancient world already took interest in the subject, making observations about sexual behavior and ethics as well as providing the first insights into the inner workings of sexual responses. These studies were later translated and used in medical schools in medieval Europe (Haeberle n.p.). From the documents by German researcher Lewandowski, the distinction between sexual biology and sexual psychology is made clear, with the former being traced back to the 17th century and the study of sexual organs, and the latter emerging only towards the end of the 19th century through the work of several Viennese researchers (Lewandowski n.p.). In turn, Michel Foucault, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, describes the acknowledgement of the importance of information about sex as early as in the 18th century, through the concept of population and the influence of an individual's use of sex and reproduction on society as a whole:

the sexual conduct of the population was taken both as an object of analysis and as a target of intervention [...] there was a progression from the crudely populationist argument [...] to the much more subtle and calculated attempts at regulation that tended to favor or discourage-according to the objectives and exigencies of the moment – an increasing birthrate.

(26)

Through these concerns, the 18th and 19th centuries saw a rise in the frequency and intensity of discourse about sex, be it medical discourse and nervous disorders, psychiatric discourse and attempts to unveil the origins of mental illness in sexual behavior such as “‘excess’, then onanism, then frustration, then ‘frauds against procreation’” (Foucault 30), or legal practice and criminalization of various sexual acts.

The medicalization and criminalization of sexuality mentioned by Foucault is present in various documents from the 19th century: one worth mentioning in the context of the study of sexuality in general and asexuality in particular is a widely known reference book for medical and legal purposes called *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Published in 1886 and subsequently expanded in twelve editions in total, it was written by one of the Viennese researchers mentioned by Lewandowski, namely the German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing. In this volume, Krafft-Ebing describes dozens of cases while explaining his categorization of sexual dysfunctions: among them, an anomaly he calls “anaesthesia sexualis” under the category of cerebral neuroses, and explained as “an absence of sexual instinct” (36) or “an absence of sexual feeling” (42). In Krafft-Ebing’s work, anaesthesia sexualis is treated as an illness, not as a possible sexual orientation, and he attributes this condition to various causes, such as “cerebral disturbances, states of psychical degeneration, and even anatomical signs of degeneration [...] organic and functional, psychical and somatic, central and peripheral [causes]” (42-47). However, in the full definition there are traces of the current understanding of asexuality. Described as a state in which “all organic impulses arising in the sexual organs, as well as all concepts, and visual, auditory, and olfactory sense-impressions, fail to excite the individual sexually” (Krafft-Ebing 36-37), anaesthesia sexualis is not merely treated as an inability of physical arousal made possible by the organic impulses arising in the sexual organs, but takes into consideration the possibility of concepts, i.e. fantasies or thoughts, as well as the role all human senses could play in sexual excitation. The descriptions of individuals supposedly afflicted by anaesthesia sexualis are intriguing as well: Krafft-Ebing mentions seven patients reporting absence of sexual feeling (six male, one female). Out of those seven, several were found to be mentally challenged, of low intelligence or with symptoms pointing towards other mental illnesses. Other cases mention emotional detachment or coldness. Three of the accounts explicitly state that the patient was completely healthy except for the lack of sexual feelings: a man in his early thirties who “has never experienced libido” and reported an interest in getting married, even though he “felt that he was incapable of the

sexual act”; another young man who “never felt libido [and] had a distaste for women and a loathing of coitus”; and a 35-year-old woman, the only female patient out of the seven mentioned, who is also described as completely healthy except never experiencing desire: “fifteen years married [...] [she] never had any erotic excitement in sexual intercourse with her husband. She was not averse to coitus, and sometimes seemed to experience pleasure in it, but she never had a wish for repetition” (Krafft-Ebing 43). While these early mentions of people without any sexual feelings or instinct cannot be taken as the first scientific references to asexuality as such, considering that they were included in chapters on sexual dysfunctions, they are nonetheless important to understand the historical reach of the idea that all human beings are naturally sexual – and in clarifying that despite the difficulty in pointing out accounts of asexuality in history, it has not been completely absent from the lives of people throughout the centuries.

The 20th century still bears traces of the medicalization of human sexual behavior, especially in the eugenics of the first decades. The establishment of institutions, societies and journals concerned with the research of human sexuality illustrates the increase of interest in the subject: these efforts are concentrated mainly in Western Europe, particularly Germany, and to some extent in the United States. In his article about the history of sexology, Haeberle mentions several important European names such as Bloch, Ellis, Hirschfeld, Moll or Freud, as well as the situation in the United States:

In the USA, the Rockefeller family takes an interest in sex research and begins to look for ways to support it. Over the next forty years, it makes substantial amounts of money available, first through the Bureau of Social Hygiene and later through the National Research Council (Division of Medical Sciences – Committee for Research in Problems of Sex). However, the scientists in charge are uncomfortable with the subject matter, refuse to investigate it, and instead use the funds for ‘uncontroversial’ basic biological research. They also fail to set up a sexological library and collection or to publish a sexological journal or even a bibliography.

(Haeberle n.p.)

Due to the attitude towards sex research in the United States at the time, the research that took place in European institutions seems to be much more in-depth. However, many of the results achieved by the early 20th-century European scientists appear rather forgotten, or at least remembered only in highly professional and academic circles. One

of the notable examples is the idea that human sexual orientation does not come only in two extremes (exclusive heterosexuality and exclusive homosexuality), but that it might be evaluated through a scale. This proposal, largely attributed to Alfred Kinsey in the late 1940s, can be found in the early writings of Magnus Hirschfeld, one of the most notable sex researchers and advocates for decriminalization of homosexuality in the late 19th century. Hirschfeld's pamphlet *Sappho and Socrates, or, How Is the Love of Men and Women for Persons of Their Own Sex to Be Explained?* was published in 1896 under a pseudonym, and includes a scale of sexual desire, on which the direction of a person's sexual desire is represented by letters A (heterosexual), B (homosexual), or A+B (bisexual). Individuals are represented by figures such as A3,B9 – this person would thus have a weak interest in the opposite sex and a very strong desire towards the same sex. Hirschfeld's scale, however, also theoretically allows for the existence of asexuality, considering a person could be marked as A0,B0, meaning no hetero- or homosexual desire is present (LeVay n.p.).

The attitude towards sex studies in the United States somewhat changed after World War II, with the surprising success of two books that came to be known as The Kinsey Reports, after their primary author, American biologist, zoologist and sexologist Alfred Kinsey. Co-written with several other researchers, the two reports were published in 1948 (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*) and 1953 (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*), providing the American public with statistics on sex life, behavior and desires of several thousand American people. The impact of Kinsey's approach and of the style of these texts on the American society was enormous:

[before the Kinsey Reports] most Americans assumed that nearly everyone conformed to what was considered traditional sexual morals, and that those who didn't were an exceptionally tiny, deviant minority. And academics weren't much better informed either. Before 1948, discussions of sexuality were mostly limited to moralists and ethicists, basing their work on assumptions and impressions of what they *thought* was going on behind closed doors [...] Kinsey changed all that. Instead of moral propositions and academic conjectures of what constituted conventional behavior, Kinsey and his colleagues were able to provide statistical evidence for a dizzying array of sexual practices, behaviors, fantasies and attitudes [...] Kinsey's massive compendium of "how many" and "how often" exploded several myths and astonished the American public with reports of what their neighbors were doing.

(Burroway n.p.)

Kinsey's research also established and popularized the concept previously introduced by European researchers of human sexual orientation as a scale rather than simply two extremes. Known as the Kinsey Scale, human sexual orientation is measured on a single scale from 0 to 6 where 0 means *exclusively heterosexual* and 6 *exclusively homosexual*, taking into consideration an individual's past and present behavior and attractions. A separate category named X was introduced in Kinsey's tables and charts to represent individuals with "no socio-sexual response" (Kinsey *et al.*, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* 658), where *socio-sexual* is determined to mean sexual behavior including at least one other person of any sex. Kinsey's definition of the X category is further clarified in the second report, together with a brief summary of the statistical findings on this group:

individuals are rated as X's if they 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. After early adolescence there are very few males in this classification [...], but a goodly number of females belong in this category in every age group [...]. It is not impossible that further analyses of these individuals might show that they do sometimes respond to socio-sexual stimuli, but they are unresponsive and inexperienced as far as it is possible to determine by any ordinary means.

(Kinsey *et al.*, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* 472)

This definition of what has come to be known as Group X, despite not being explicitly named so in the Kinsey Reports, again points towards the current understanding of asexuality, even allowing for the option that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not the only possibilities, but rather extreme points of a longer scale. Asexuality does not necessarily have to be exclusive, and individuals who rate as X can, in specific situations, respond erotically to some stimuli (thus indirectly paving the way for the later development of the idea of asexuality itself as a scale). The prevalence reported by Kinsey for the X group was 3 to 4% of the unmarried men in the study, 14-19% of the unmarried women, 1-3% of the married women aged between 20 and 35, and 5-8% of the previously married women (Kinsey *et al.*, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*; Kinsey *et al.*, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*; Van Houdenhove *et al.* 177).

Not much later, in 1957, William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson initiated their research on human sexual responses. In the next four decades, they published several studies regarding this topic and introduced various concepts such as the human sexual response cycle or the possibilities of a successful therapy for people with sexual

dysfunctions (e.g. *Human Sexual Response*; *Human Sexual Inadequacy*; *The Pleasure Bond*; *Homosexuality in Perspective*). The classification of sexual disorders by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has also been based on research by Masters and Johnson, despite some of the shortcomings of their conclusions pointed out by several other authors. While it is understandable that their primary goal in that particular period of time was to assert sexuality and sexual behavior as a natural and acceptable part of human life, “by emphasising the ideology that sexual desire is natural, sexology and psychiatry have produced a discourse that stigmatises individuals who experience low or no sexual desire, or who experience it in a way not fitting ‘normal’ sexuality” (Flore 154-155), this distinction between normal and abnormal sexual desire has played a significant part in the debates about whether or not asexuality should continue to be treated as a disorder or rather accepted as another natural part of some people’s lives, since Masters and Johnson² did not focus on the individuals who did not respond in an anticipated or desired manner. As Flore points out, “Masters and Johnson’s work discloses that only subjects reporting ‘a *positive* history of masturbatory and coital experience [were] accepted in the program’ [...]. The result is a distorted golden standard of sexuality” (Flore 155).

Kinsey’s scale, while still widely known nowadays and recognized as revolutionary for that particular period of time, has been reconsidered by several researchers. One of the most notable is the scale introduced by Michael Storms, an American psychologist, in 1978. Where Kinsey understood sexual orientation as a “bipolar, unidimensional continuum from heterosexuality to homosexuality” (Storms 784), Storms modified the scale to include two axes, one for hetero-eroticism and the other for homo-eroticism. As he explains in his article “Theories of Sexual Orientation”, the reason for this reworking was Storms’ disagreement with Kinsey’s assumption that “an individual loses degrees of one orientation as he or she moves toward the opposite end of the scale; thus, bisexuals are seen as half heterosexual and half homosexual or a compromise between the two extremes” (Storms 785), a disagreement stemming from the changes made in the theories of sex roles in the 1970s, showing that masculinity and femininity can also vary independently instead of being positioned on the same scale (Storms 785). This model thus allows for the inclusion of the group previously omitted

² Masters and Johnson’s legacy has gained momentum again recently thanks to the celebrated Showtime series *Masters of Sex*, which started to be broadcast in 2013 (information at <http://www.sho.com/sho/masters-of-sex/home>).

from the talks about sexual orientation: asexuals. Unlike Kinsey and his vague marking, X, Storms even uses the word *asexual* explicitly to describe the people who would score both low homo-eroticism and low hetero-eroticism on the scale. However, in his 1980 paper, he does not elaborate further on this group, choosing to validate his reworking of Kinsey's scale by focusing on the comparison of erotic fantasies in heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual men and women. Nevertheless, Storms' works are often cited as "the first depictions of asexuality in a scientific source concerned with the study of human sex" (Przybylo, "Producing Facts" 5).

Around the same time, Myra T. Johnson published "Asexual and Autoerotic Women: Two Invisible Groups" (1977), which could technically be called "the earliest article to dedicate itself fully to the exploration of asexual experiences" (Owen 119). In this piece, Johnson used letters written by potentially asexual women to editors of women's magazines to point out and discuss the omission of asexual and autoerotic females from the texts in the publications of those years. According to Van Houdenhove *et al.* (176), Johnson was also the first to use the term *asexual* to describe people, her article being published several years before Storms' "Theories". She also provided a definition for these individuals as "men and women who, despite their physical or emotional condition, sexual history and relational status or ideological orientation, chose not to engage in sexual activity" (Johnson 99). She makes several interesting points in her article, well above the usual discussion of asexuality at that time: as she noted, when the word *asexual* was used then, "its meaning [was] usually left vague, with its definition ranging from 'unexpressed' sexuality to 'absence of sexual desire' due to 'loss of the sex glands' or to psychiatric disorder" (96). Johnson goes on to mention several problems that asexuals have, or might have, experienced throughout history, e.g. asexual men using the Vietnam War as an escape from the society that expected both men and women to "move in couples" (97), or historical views of female sexuality as something that should be restricted to the point of asexuality possibly being considered a religious duty, which later transformed into something which needed to be cured (98). This author also makes it clear that she does not endorse the radical feminist view of the institution of heterosexual sex as an act of male domination and female passivity which should be destroyed:

In seeking to liberate women, the advocates of these strategies may be inviting yet another tyranny. A consensus which praises women who do not have sex with men as politically conscious might alleviate the oppression of traditionally

assigned female functions, but would probably create new oppressive functions. The woman who still wants to have sex with men might function as ‘scapegoat’ and the woman who feels asexual or autosexual might function as a political symbol – her identity still lost in the slogans, and her reality going unnoticed.
(Johnson 104)

The difference between an asexual and an autoerotic (or autosexual) woman in Johnson’s writing is addressed as well: “the asexual woman [...] has no sexual desires at all [while] the autoerotic woman [...] recognizes such desires but prefers to satisfy them alone” (99), which does not strictly correlate with the current most typically used view of asexuality, but it is nonetheless an important acknowledgement of the existence of asexuality in the time when this was not a well-known subject matter. The importance of Johnson’s article therefore lies in her astute observations as well as in her description of asexual women as invisible, “abandoned by the sexual revolution and the feminist movement”, their existence ignored, denied, and having their asexuality dismissed as caused by “religious, neurotic, or political reasons” (Van Houdenhove *et al.* 177). Interestingly, while Johnson points out the invisibility of asexual women, she does not discuss asexual men and the potential difficulties of negotiating asexuality and masculinity together.

At that time, the attitude towards sex in medicine, especially in psychology and psychiatry, had already shifted towards the positive extreme, i.e. reinforcing the idea of sex, or at least desire for sex, as natural behavior that should be present in a healthy individual’s everyday life. In 1980, the APA published the third revised edition of their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III), including Inhibited Sexual Desire Disorder, later renamed Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). Published in the same year as Storms’ article delineating asexuality as a possible fourth sexual orientation along heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality, the DSM-III placed asexual individuals firmly into the space of mental disorders. The APA had removed homosexuality as such from the list of mental disorders seven years earlier, and while ‘ego-dystonic sexual orientation’ – a state in which an individual experiences marked distress at their unwanted sexual orientation and expresses wishes to change it – was also removed from the revised edition of DSM-III in 1987, no significant changes were made as to the diagnosis or suggested possibilities for HSDD in the following edition. Due to the classification of the lack of sexual desire as a mental health issue,

very few researchers entertained the possibility of asexuality as a sexual orientation in the next decade.

Despite the deeply rooted belief that sexual behavior or desires characterized as abnormal or deviant were a sign of pathology, some researchers became interested in finding out if there truly is a close relation between sexual orientation and psychopathology. Paula Nurius tried to examine whether heterosexuals can truly be expected to “constitute an upper end of a ‘wellness continuum’” (121) as opposed to homosexuals, often thought to represent the other end of that continuum. While Nurius claims to pay attention predominantly to hetero- and homosexual participants in her study, she does mention asexuals, “those who largely prefer not to be involved in any sexual activities” (122). In her work, several different measures of determining a person’s sexual orientation were used, and the subjects were eventually divided in regard to homosexual and heterosexual preference measures. Those who scored less than 10.0 on both measures were labeled asexual, with this group consisting of 56 persons out of 689 participants in total, 5% of men and 10% of women (Nurius 126-127). The results show that according to the scores for depression, self-esteem and sexual satisfaction, the asexual group indicated the greatest degree, followed by the bisexual, homosexual, and heterosexual; a significant outcome despite the fact that Nurius does not go into greater detail on the asexual group.

In 1990, Berkey *et al.* developed the Multidimensional Scale of Sexuality, described in the article of the same name, in order to validate and contrast the proposed six categories of bisexuality, as well as categories of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and asexuality. However, despite the significance of including five questions specifically designed for the investigation of asexuality, none out of 148 participants who returned questionnaires to the researchers actually identified as asexual (Morano 21), which did not appear surprising to the researchers due to the reported low frequency of asexuality (Przybylo, “Producing Facts” 7).

1.2 The 21st Century

These examples show that in the 20th century asexuality was still mostly omitted from research or mentioned in passing as a possibility, without gaining much attention as a research topic. However, towards the end of this period, the emergence of the Internet helped asexuals gain some presence online in the form of forums or groups focusing on asexuality. In 1997, Zoe O’Reilly published the article “My Life as an Amoeba” on

StarNet Dispatches, claiming to be “out and proud to be asexual” (O’Reilly n.p.). The text garnered some attention and, in the discussion that ensued, people started commenting about their own experience as asexuals. In the same vein, several online groups and forums emerged in the following years, the most notable of which include the Yahoo! community “Haven for the Human Amoeba” (groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/havenforthehumanamoeba) and the webpage “The Official Nonlibidoism Society/The Official Asexual Society” (currently defunct, archived at: archive.today/7M501), established in 2000, as well as “The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network” (AVEN) in 2001. In the next decade, the latter came to grow into the largest online community for asexual people, offering a safe and educational space for questioning potential asexuals, as well as for allies and non-asexual partners, friends, or family members. The importance of these platforms lies not only in the possibility of self-identification, but also in offering researchers a place to recruit asexual participants for surveys and studies, which, due to the low prevalence of asexuality in general population, could be difficult if they relied only on random samples.

The beginning of the empirical discourse regarding asexuality is attributed by many, if not all, current researchers to Anthony Bogaert and his 2004 article “Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample”. As the title suggests, the study was based on the national probability sample, including more than 18,000 British citizens, out of which roughly 1% (57 men, 138 women) responded in agreement with the statement ‘I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all’ (“Asexuality: Prevalence” 279). Aside from the number of asexuals in the population, Bogaert looked at the possible predicting factors of asexuality: these included demographics (age, marital status, education, social class, race/ethnicity), sexual experience (age of the first sexual experience of any kind, total number of sexual partners, frequency of sexual activity over the last 7 days), health (self-perceived state of health, presence of long-term illness, medical condition, or permanent disability), physical development (onset of menarche, weight, height), and religiosity (existence of religious affiliation, frequency of attendance at religious services). The results indicated that asexual people had fewer sexual partners, a later onset (and lower frequency) of sexual activity, and less sexual experience with partners, which, according to Bogaert, “provides some validation of the concept of asexuality” (“Asexuality: Prevalence” 282). Furthermore, asexual people were somewhat older than sexual people, more women

than men reported being asexual, and more than 40% have experienced a long-term cohabiting or marital relationship. Asexuals were more likely to come from lower socioeconomic conditions and achieve lower education than sexual individuals. Poorer health, shorter height and lower weight also seemed to be more likely in asexual individuals, as well as higher religiosity with regard to attending services (Bogaert, “Asexuality: Prevalence” 282).

These findings seem to have spurred this author’s interest in asexuality and prompted him to investigate the issue further. The first article was followed by another one in 2006, titled “Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Asexuality”, in which he posed several important conceptual and definitional questions of the current discourse about asexuality. His definition of asexuality appears consistent with the recent research on sexual orientation, which emphasizes “sexual attraction rather than overt sexual behavior, sexual identity, and romantic attraction” (Bogaert, “Toward a Conceptual Understanding” 242), pointing out that asexual people can still engage in sexual activities for a variety of reasons, do not have to self-identify as asexual, and can be romantically attracted to others. Bogaert also goes on to discuss the differences between asexuality and Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder and why he does not identify asexuality with this disorder (e.g. the necessity of marked distress for the diagnosis of HSDD), or two main objections that might be raised against accepting asexuality as a unique sexual orientation: the first one being the questionable validity of self-reporting or self-identifying; the second being the potential overlap between very low sexual desire and a complete absence of sexual attraction (“Toward a Conceptual Understanding” 245).

Bogaert’s proposals sparked the interest of other researchers in the subject of asexuality. In 2007, Nicole Prause and Cynthia A. Graham published their paper “Asexuality: Classification and Characterization”, based on two studies of self-identified asexuals: first, a quantitative phase in which four self-identified asexuals were interviewed to help with the hypotheses for the second, larger part, in which 1,146 people completed questionnaires about their sexual history, inhibition and excitation, desire, and an open-response questionnaire about asexual identity (341). The work, widely cited in later literature on asexuality (e.g. Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*; Decker), supports Bogaert’s finding that the asexual group was in general significantly older than the non-asexual group. However, some questions in Prause and Graham’s studies resulted in a different outcome: the asexuals in their research did not show any

marked difference based on gender and were more likely to have completed college than non-asexual people. Also, Prause and Graham broached subjects not mentioned by Bogaert due to the fact that his articles were based on pre-existing data not focusing on asexuality, e.g. likelihood of speaking to a health professional about their sexual desire level (asexuals were not more likely to approach a profession about this issue than non-asexuals). The expected experiences of an asexual person were investigated as perceived by both asexuals and non-asexuals, the most common being no/low sexual desire (expected more by non-asexuals) and no/low sexual experience (slightly more often expected by asexuals) (Prause and Graham 351), serving as indication that the level of general sexual desire does not play a great role in self-identification of asexual people. The last part of Prause and Graham's study included questions about the perceived benefits and drawbacks of asexuality. Four most commonly perceived benefits were avoiding the problems of intimate relationships, decreasing threats to physical health or unwanted pregnancy, experiencing less social pressure to find suitable partners, and having more free time; interestingly, "a greater proportion of asexuals cited each benefit compared with non-asexuals" (Prause and Graham 352). The four commonly mentioned drawbacks of asexuality were problems establishing nonsexual, dyadic intimate relationships, needing to find out what problem is causing the asexuality, a negative public perception of asexuality, and missing the positive aspects of sex. Once again, a greater number of asexuals mentioned these drawbacks, being much more likely to report the need to find out what problem was causing the asexuality, and non-asexuals more likely to mention missing the positive aspects of sex as a disadvantage of asexuality (Prause and Graham 352). All of these conclusions illustrate the still-pervasive medicalization of sexuality and normalization of sex as a natural instinct. While asexuals were mainly reporting urge to discover 'what was wrong with them', non-asexuals mainly thought of asexuality as 'missing the positive aspects' which are perceived as inseparable from sex.

One of the first publications to focus predominantly not on demographics, but on identity formation in relation to asexuality, is Kristin Scherrer's "Coming to an Asexual Identity: Negotiating Identity, Negotiating Desire" (2008). Having recruited participants for her survey from AVEN, she used the responses of self-identified asexual people to discuss various issues relating to the formation of asexual identity, such as possible definitions of asexuality, the role of Internet-based communities in the creation of one's identity, the perception of sexuality and sexual orientation in general and in relation to

asexuality in particular, and the romantic orientation and its role in forming relationships. Based on the open-ended responses of 102 participants, Scherrer concluded that the lack of visibility and awareness of asexuality created difficulties in its inclusion into the sexuality-based politics of other sexual minority groups. She also explained how asexuality has largely escaped the attention of legal institutions due to the lack of desire and sexual behavior, marking asexuality as different from other sexual minorities, who have often been prosecuted for expressing their orientation. Another important difference between asexuals and other marginalized sexualities is that while they all employ the Internet in creating identity-based communities, asexuals lack the physical spaces for meeting people of the same sexual orientation, such as bars, pubs, bookstores, etc. catering predominantly to asexual people. However, asexuals still draw on the language of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) groups in order to create, shape and explain their identity and experience. Scherrer suggested that future research on asexuality should investigate how asexual people negotiate relationships and how it could change the way relationships are categorized, as well as explore how asexual identity relates to health and mental health experiences and how it might intersect with other social identities, e.g. gender, class, body image, disability, or age.

The year 2010 marks a significant increase in the number of researchers and scholarly production focusing on asexuality. Poston and Baumle publish “Patterns of Asexuality in the United States” using data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), which had questionnaires distributed among people aged 15 to 44. Attempting to elaborate on the prevalence and demographic of asexuality as reported in the United States, since Bogaert’s data had been obtained from a British sample, the authors admit that the questions posed in the NSFG could be problematic in relation to asexuality. The first set of questions, apart from the problematic classification of ‘sex’ as only vaginal between a man and a woman, ‘oral or anal’ in cases of two men and ‘sexual contact’ in case of women, assesses only the behavior and/or past experience of the participants. With regard to sexual identity, the questions fail to provide an adequate option of no sexual attraction or no sexual desire: “Do you think of yourself as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or something else?”; “Are you [...] Only attracted to the opposite sex; Mostly attracted to the opposite sex; Equally attracted to the opposite sex and the same sex; Mostly attracted to the same sex; Only attracted to the same sex; Not sure” (Poston and Baumle 517-518). Participants were determined to be

asexual by the authors based on the expected 'asexual response' to all three abovementioned questions (a participant answered 'no' to the questions about whether or not they ever had sex, chose 'something else' as their sexual orientation, and answered 'not sure' to the question about sexual attraction) (Poston and Baumle 518). This approach most likely excluded many participants from (and unnecessarily included others in) the category of 'asexual', e.g. asexuals who have had sex, non-asexual people who have not had sex, asexual people who chose to identify as hetero-, homo- or bisexual due to low visibility of the label 'asexual' and its non-inclusion in the survey, etc. The data collected through this survey show that

almost 5% of the females and more than 6% of the males report that they have never had sex in their lifetimes [...] almost 1% each of both the females (0.8%) and the males (0.7%) are "not sure" about their sexual attraction [...] the weighted percentage [...] of females and males giving the "something else" response to the question on sexual orientation are 3.8% and 3.9%, respectively. Of all the respondents giving an "asexual" response to any one of the three questions, only 0.6 % of the females and 0.9% of the males gave the asexual response on all three dimensions.

(Poston and Baumle 519-520)

While the results of this examination of the NSFG questionnaires provide a number close to Bogaert's estimation of 1% of the population, it is difficult to draw any solid conclusions based solely on the prevalence of expected answers when the same conclusions could easily be ascribed to several other groups of people.

Also in 2010, Brotto *et al.* published "Asexuality: A Mixed-Methods Approach", an article re-examining some questions related to asexual people. They found an elevated rate of atypical social functioning among asexuals, and that "participants felt compelled to underrate their psychiatric symptoms in hopes of minimizing any relationship between asexuality and psychopathology that the researchers may have hypothesized" (Brotto *et al.* 608), indicating that asexual people were already accepting their asexuality as a sexual orientation, wishing to erase any possible links between asexuality and mental disorders. The consistent way in which asexuals defined their asexuality in this study also points to a similar conclusion. Perusing the definition of asexuality used by Bogaert and also published on the AVEN webpage, the asexuals in the interviews for this study all used a form of 'lack of sexual attraction' to describe their orientation (Brotto *et al.* 609), a significant difference from

Prause and Graham's 2007 study, in which asexuals seemed to lack consistent language to describe their identity.

Brotto and Yule also conducted a study of physiological responses of asexual women to sexual stimuli, based on the premise that "whereas men show patterns of genital arousal that correspond to their stated sexual orientation [...] lesbian and heterosexual women showed the same degree of increase in vaginal pulse amplitude (VPA) [...], regardless of their stated sexual orientation and irrespective of the stimuli shown – whether heterosexual, homosexual, or non-human primate" (701). It was hypothesized that while viewing an erotic film, asexual women would thus show the same levels of genital arousal as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual women, but that levels of reported subjective arousal would be lower, which was supported by the findings, leading to the conclusion that "asexuality is not a sexual dysfunction – or perhaps, more precisely, it is not a disorder of sexual arousal" (Brotto and Yule 707).

2012 witnessed the publication of the first book dealing solely with the subject of asexuality: Bogaert's *Understanding Asexuality*, where the author attempts to answer the most prominent questions about this issue, summing up most of the research done until then. He provides an overview of the history and prevalence of asexuality, as well as predictions on whether or not asexuals masturbate, how gender pertains to an individual's asexual identity, why asexuality should be studied further, or how humor, art, or food relate to asexuality. Throughout the book, Bogaert claims several times that asexuality should be analyzed further and in depth because it can offer insight and new understanding of sexuality as such. *Understanding Asexuality* is then a rather solid cornerstone for anyone interested in taking up the study of this subject.

In the same year the first material focusing on the possible discrimination of asexuals came out: MacInnis and Hodson's "Intergroup Bias toward 'Group X': Evidence of Prejudice, Dehumanization, Avoidance, and Discrimination against Asexuals" presented the results of two studies on the topic. In the first one, the scholars questioned 148 heterosexual undergraduate students to determine their general views of sexual orientation groups. The outcomes showed that heterosexuals were viewed the most positively, and among the sexual minorities, asexuals were viewed the most negatively (MacInnis and Hodson 731). Participants were also asked to rate 'uniquely human' and 'human nature' traits in heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, and asexuals. Again, "asexuals were perceived to be least 'human' in terms of both uniquely human and human nature traits/characteristics" (MacInnis and Hodson 732),

underlining the assumption that sex is an inherent part of what makes a person perceivable as human. The only difference occurred on the scale of discrimination intentions: while participants desired future contact with asexuals less than with any other sexual minority group, they were willing to hire or rent mostly to heterosexuals, followed by homosexuals, asexuals, and bisexuals, respectively. The second study strove to eliminate the possible bias of asexuality being the least known form of sexuality, which could elevate the rates of discrimination. It also included opinions on sapiosexuals³, predicting that familiarity with this sexual orientation would be lower than familiarity with asexuality. The second study more or less replicated the findings of the first one on dehumanization and possible discrimination of asexual individuals, also noting that “[a]lthough asexuals were not the least familiar sexual minority target, they were nevertheless the most negatively evaluated. That is, attitudes toward asexuals were significantly more negative than attitudes toward sapiosexuals” (MacInnis and Hodson 739).

More and more debates on the topic of asexuality are being produced every year. The interest has shifted from merely studying the prevalence or the possibility of asexuality as a sexual orientation to discussing the problems asexual people might face on daily basis. The *Psychology & Sexuality* journal published a special issue on asexuality in 2013 (Vol. 4, Issue 2), including articles by several authors dealing with various topics, e.g. mental health and interpersonal functioning of asexuals, HSDD, asexual identity, and the possible future of asexuality as a research subject. In 2014, a self-identified asexual author and activist, Julie Sondra Decker, published her book *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*, proving the assumption found in Brotto *et al.* that asexuals are highly motivated to participate in the broadening of research on their identity. Decker has been a prominent figure of the asexual community since 1998 and this book reflects her many years of experience in that it accurately describes the problems asexual people might come across in everyday life, as well as the attitudes asexuals might encounter or adopt regarding issues of orientation, identity, sexuality, etc. Decker’s understanding of asexuality seems largely in accord with the AVEN’s definitions, most likely because Decker herself has played an important part in providing the answers to the questions commonly asked online or among potential asexual. In the first part of her book, she thus explains asexuality as a sexual orientation,

³ People who are sexually attracted to intelligence in others (sapiosexual.com).

a mature state (in opposition to imagining asexuals as merely pre-sexual or immature), a healthy status, a description of how a person experiences attraction, and a reasonable possibility. She then goes on to describe romantic attraction and orientation, or the experience of asexuality based on several factors (age, race, gender, disability etc.). Common myths about how asexuality comes to be or about the behavior of asexuals are tackled, such as the possibility of past abuse in asexuals, or the myth of asexuals merely not having met the right person yet. The last sections of the volume are aimed at people who either think they might be asexual themselves, or know someone who might be asexual. These two chapters offer advice and recount personal experience on how to handle telling parents and partners or, vice versa, how to deal with being told by a partner or a child that they are asexual.

In 2014, Routledge produced a collection of essays titled *Asexualities: Queer and Feminist Perspectives* and edited by Karli J. Cerankowski and Megan Milks. As they explain in the introduction, the title of the collection comes from the way they perceive this project as both queer – in that it is “making sense of the social marginalization and pathologization of bodies based on the preference to not have sex, along with exploring new possibilities in intimacy, desire and kinship structures” – and feminist “in its attention to structures of power and oppression, specifically around gender, as well as sexual object choice” (Cerankowski and Milks 3). Among the sections included in this anthology, the most relevant to this thesis is undoubtedly Part IV, titled “Asexuality and Masculinity”, particularly Ela Przybylo’s article “Masculine Doubt and Sexual Wonder: Asexually-Identified Men Talk about Their (A)sexualities”. Przybylo explores “the discourses that make asexuality more or less implausible and uninhabitable for men” (Przybylo, “Masculine Doubt” 225). Through interviews with three asexually identified men, Przybylo shows how these men have trouble reconciling their asexuality with the traditional ideas of masculinity performed as heteronormative sexuality. While two of the interviewed asexuals identified explicitly as male, the third interviewee seemed more vague about his gender, stating that he is of masculine gender, but that he does not feel strong connection to his masculinity: “I don’t look at the ‘M’ of my license and feel [...] upset about it or anything but I could do without it [...] I don’t feel overly feminine either, just, you know, whatever” (226). In this, it already becomes apparent that some asexual men might have trouble identifying with a masculine identity, possibly on the basis of not being included in the male bonding rituals or male identity affirmation based on performing sexuality. Przybylo claims that the men she

has interviewed were all “highly aware of the pressures that exist for men to have sex, to be sexual, and to exaggeratedly mobilize their sexuality to bond with other men and to fit in” (227). Przybylo also explains the concept of sexual imperative, which, according to her, works on four planes: privileging sex above any other activities, conflating sexuality with the self, coding sex as healthy and good without any regard for context, and emphasizing that sex is the “glue” to any romantic relationship (228). All of these four dimensions can be explored when talking about asexuality in general and asexuality in the media in particular: one of the interviewees also hints that looking at television programs shows how characters of a mature age who have never been married are portrayed as “some sort of a loser type” (229). The importance of sexuality for a male identity becomes apparent from the responses of another interviewee, who describes his adolescence as “playing along” with the way his friends started to organize their activities around the sexual, e.g. looking at porn magazines or discussing sex. The interviewee himself recalls not having any interest in the topic, attempting to understand himself through the concept of being gay or being a late bloomer: furthermore, the man also states that he feels he has “lost out socially because [...] a lot of social activities seem to be [...] centered around sex” (229). This difficulty in socializing with other men might contribute to the difficulty in reconciling a masculine and an asexual identity. Another problem is pointed out by an interviewee who claims that the culture pressures men to “perform sexually, like that’s the essence of manliness” (230). While asexual men might recognize the societal and cultural pressure to be sexual as a construct, due to their own unwillingness to participate in such activities, the ever-present burden of having to perform sexually is already ingrained in their minds from early age. Even in romantic relationships, sex is often perceived as inevitable and unavoidable: an interviewee who was married for several years speaks about having sex mostly to please his wife while understanding it as something he had to do in order to maintain their marriage: “I wanted these other things in a relationship other than sex that are more important to me but after a while I felt like sex is the *most* important thing” (231). Przybylo then mentions the male sexual drive discourse, which presumes that “men have a physiological and biological drive or libido that requires that they regularly engage in sex” (231). Sex is positioned as a biological necessity of survival, an indispensable part of what it means to be male (and masculine) in the modern society, representing another obstacle asexual men have to overcome in order to reconcile their asexuality and their masculinity.

In another article, focused on health and disability, Eunjung Kim explains the basic problem of asexuality and disability: “while disabled people argue that the asexuality ascribed to them is a myth, some asexual people maintain that asexuality is not a disorder, illness, or deficiency. This mutual negation is driven by the efforts of both to avoid the stigma of connection to the other” (Kim 273). This negation is further expanded upon by Gupta and illustrated on the example of the *Adams v. Rice* court case⁴. The connections between asexuality and disability are also highly relevant to the discussion of asexual masculinities on American television, partly due to the still pervasive perception of asexuality as a potentially pathological state, but also because of the portrayal of potentially asexual characters as having some type of a mental disorder.

One part of the Routledge collection also examines the portrayal of asexuality in the media: Cerankowski expands on the presentation of asexuality in the American daytime talk shows as a spectacle, claiming that “the transfer of the body into spectacle makes it available as a fetish object in multiple senses – as an object of erotic desire and speculation and also as a commodity, a body whose image is marketable to a public hungry with the desire for knowledge, sensation, ownership, and possession” (Cerankowski 142). This author also explains how visibility can either further a cause of a group or uphold its continued oppression, using the example of AVEN and its paradoxical position of challenging the norms of the society while seeking to be normalized. Furthermore, Sarah Sinwell describes how asexuals are represented as alien in the media, often connecting asexuality to pathologization or medicalization as well as forcing asexuality onto several groups, such as overweight people, Asians, nerds, or people with a disability. Sinwell uses the American crime drama series *Dexter* and the film *Mysterious Skin* as examples, but the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* no doubt fits into the narrative of an asexual as a nerd and possibly even a disabled person, as this dissertation will prove.

The editors of the volume, Cerankowski and Milks, while not identifying as asexual at the moment, have both experienced long-term periods in which asexuality as a term would have described their state, had they possessed the language of asexuality to define themselves (Cerankowski and Milks 3-4). Together with Decker’s book, the

⁴ In 2008, a court defined sexual activity as a major life activity under the criteria of the disability rights law, generating a largely negative response from asexual activists and a positive response from disability activists. This created a rift between these two minority groups.

recent years mark the emergence of works about asexuality by authors who are either asexual themselves or to whom asexuality holds personal relevance.

Published in the same year as the Routledge volume, Elizabeth Emens' article "Compulsory Sexuality" in the *Stanford Law Review* offers consideration of asexuality within legal practice. Despite the fact that asexuality is not a completely unknown term within the US law, so far, only the state of New York has included asexuals in their legal protection against discrimination through New York's Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act (SONDA) of 2002 (Emens 362). The text expands on the ways in which the current system privileges sexuality, putting forward four types of legal interaction with asexuality that might arise: legal requirements of sexual activity (e.g. consummation of marriage); legal exceptions to shield sexuality from commodification (e.g. prohibition of creating contracts about sex); legal protections from others' sexuality (e.g. obscenity or sexual harassment laws); and legal protections for sexual identity (e.g. antidiscrimination laws) (Emens 349-363).

As we have seen in this revision of the specialized literature, asexuality has moved from the field of the mythical and unbelievable into the area of issues worth debating from various viewpoints. Asexual identity and experience has been introduced as an important issue in medical as well as legal discourse, and the available research on the topic has been examined chronologically to illustrate the rise in the visibility of asexuality as a valid and valued research topic. However, not many texts on asexuality deal explicitly with the way asexuality and gender interact: articles focused on asexual women seem to be predominantly concerned with the physiological responses of a female asexual body, while one of the two articles about asexual masculinities focuses on early 20th-century cinema and the other is based on interviews with three asexual men. However, seeing as gender is an important part of the identity formation process, it is necessary to examine not only the current debates on asexuality, but also the basic concepts of masculinity, and how these two identities might influence the other. The current debates on these concepts, which are at the basis of the analyses developed in the second part of this thesis, are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

THE CURRENT DEBATES ABOUT ASEXUALITY AND MASCULINITY

2.1 Debates about Asexuality

In the last few years, the study of asexuality has come a long way, as the previous chapter recalls. Instead of focusing strictly on statistics and demographics, researchers have started debating other important topics, often with the help of the asexual community and its leading representatives. These topics include the definition of asexuality and how far should it stretch with regard to some activities such as masturbation, lifelong or acquired asexuality, negotiation of relationships in the life of an asexual, or how asexuality can provide insight into the sexual. Since these debates often operate with sexual attraction, sexual desire, and sexual behavior this chapter first defines these terms.

However basic these expressions might sound, it is not always easy to find a consistent definition. Dictionaries describe *attraction* as “a feeling that makes someone romantically or sexually interested in another person” (Merriam-Webster n.p.), “the action or power of evoking interest in or liking for someone or something” (Oxford Dictionaries n.p.), or “the feeling of liking someone, especially in a sexual way” (MacMillan Dictionary n.p.). The basic definitions of the same concept thus vary from including romantic interest alongside the sexual, to defining attraction as an action rather than a feeling, or to equating attraction with the feeling of liking itself. Furthermore, when searching for *sexual attraction*, one often finds descriptions such as “attractiveness on the basis of sexual desire” (Vocabulary.com n.p.), freely interchanging attraction and attractiveness as synonyms. For this reason, researchers dealing with the topic of asexuality have to be careful about defining their terminology in very clear terms. Anthony Bogaert, whose definition of asexuality is predominantly used in current research, characterizes sexual attraction as “the ‘sexual’ or lust lure for others” (*Understanding Asexuality* 11) and conflates it with sexual orientation, claiming that who people are sexually attracted to decides their sexual orientation. This definition concurs with the way the asexual community understands sexual attraction and the way it is described on the AVEN webpage, i.e.

a feeling that sexual people get that causes them to desire sexual contact with a specific other person. It is often, but not always, felt along with other forms of

attraction – i.e. sometimes a person experiencing sexual attraction will only want sex [...] and other times they will desire sex as well as romantic interaction or other things.

(AVEN, “Sexual Attraction” n.p.)

For the purposes of this thesis, *sexual attraction* is understood in accordance with Bogaert’s and AVEN’s definitions as a sexual lure towards others, i.e. desire towards sexual contact with another person.

To study asexuality and all its nuances, it is equally necessary to differentiate between sexual and *romantic attraction*. Where the former is defined as the desire for sexual contact or sexual relationships and forms the basis for a person’s sexual orientation, the latter can be characterized as a desire towards romantic contact and/or romantic relationships, forming a person’s romantic orientation. Romantic attraction is often understood to be simply one part of sexual orientation; the APA webpage defines *sexual orientation* as “a person’s romantic, emotional or sexual attraction to another person” (“Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality” n.p.). Scherrer points out the imminent identification of the romantic with the sexual in the society: if a relationship lacks the sexual component, it becomes difficult to define, since “sex has been used as the standard that delineates romantic relationships from friendship and defines these relationships as importantly different” (Scherrer 60). However, the asexual community as well as several researchers have found that separating these two types of attraction into distinct categories can help make sense of the responses asexual people provide in questionnaires, e.g. inconsistencies in responses to open-ended questions about their sexual orientation (Prause and Graham; Brotto *et al.*). For this reason, it is assumed that sexual orientation and romantic orientation do not necessarily have to be in strict concord. While this argument is predominantly used to talk about asexual people who are romantically attracted to other people, it is also acknowledged that other variations on the combination of sexual and romantic orientation can occur, e.g. a bisexual person can have a strictly homoromantic orientation, and while being sexually attracted to men and women, this person would wish for a romantic relationship only with same-sex partners. Just as there is asexuality as a sexual orientation, aromanticism as a romantic orientation exists and is defined as being romantically attracted to no one (Decker 22; “Aromantic” n.p.). Aromanticism is also not limited to asexual people. A person of any sexual orientation can be aromantic: data from a 2014 AVEN census suggest that almost 26% of asexuals participating in the census identify as aromantic, as well as 3.5% of

demisexuals⁵, 9.1% of gray-asexuals⁶, and 4.3% of non-asexuals in the census. The other most typical romantic orientations in the census were heteroromantic (19.8% asexuals, 27.2% demisexuals, 26.5% gray-asexuals, 22.3% non-asexuals) and panromantic⁷ (17.7% asexuals, 27.8% demisexuals, 23.7% gray-asexuals, 21% non-asexuals) (“The 2014 AVEN Community Census” n.p.).

Finding a consistent definition of sexual desire proves equally difficult to finding one for attraction. In several cases, desire is equated to other terms – for example, the Cambridge Dictionary defines *desire* as “a strong sexual attraction to someone” (Cambridge Dictionary, “Desire” n.p.). Entries in other dictionaries range from relating desire to a specific person, e.g. “a feeling of wanting to have sex with (someone)” (Merriam Webster, “Desire” n.p.) to a more general description focusing on the feeling itself, without highlighting the importance of another person in the process, e.g. “a desire for sexual intimacy” (The Free Dictionary, “Sexual Desire” n.p.), or a “strong sexual feeling or appetite” (Oxford Dictionaries, “Desire” n.p.). A definition by Rosen *et al.* ties together several of these concepts, characterizing desire as “a feeling that includes wanting to have a sexual experience, feeling receptive to a partner’s sexual initiation, and thinking and fantasizing about sex” (191). Bogaert equates desire with lust, or “in more colloquial terms, ‘horniness’ – that tingly feeling that makes people engage in sexual activity and, perhaps, have a release of sexual tension: orgasm” (*Understanding Asexuality* 21). Interestingly, the definition provided by AVEN, while simple enough – “the desire to have sex with someone” (AVEN, “Sexual Desire” n.p.) – branches out to primary and secondary sexual desire, stressing the importance of motivation for sexual contact. This model was first proposed by a user of the AVEN forum in 2006, and has since been developed into the current version: while primary sexual desire is understood as “the desire to engage in sexual activity for the purposes of personal pleasure whether physical, emotional, or both”, secondary sexual desire is listed as “the desire to engage in sexual activity for the purposes other than personal pleasure, such as the happiness of the other person involved or the conception of children” (“Primary vs. Secondary Sexual Attraction” n.p.). This distinction adheres to the claim that asexual people may be motivated to engage in sexual activities for

⁵Demisexuality explained below.

⁶Gray-asexuality explained below.

⁷Panromantic: a person who experiences romantic attraction towards people regardless of their sex or gender identity

reasons other than being sexually attracted to someone (Brotto *et al.*; Prause and Graham; Van Houdenhove *et al.*). Other terms often used as synonyms include sexual drive, sex drive or libido. In this thesis, *sexual desire* and all its synonyms stand for the feeling of wanting to engage in sexual activities. The necessity of the presence of another person is not stressed due to the uncertain position of masturbation as a sexual activity, as discussed below.

Defining *asexuality* is a demanding task for both researchers and asexual communities. As explained in the previous chapter, in a 2004 paper Bogaert acquired the data on the prevalence of asexuals within the British population by counting the number of people who reported to agree with the statement “I have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all” (“Asexuality: Prevalence” 281). Flore sees the requirement of a lifelong asexuality as problematic, because “defining asexuality as ‘a lack of sexual attraction’ in research surveys [...] requires that self-identified asexuals constantly report their sexual orientation as asexual” (156), which is not always the case. Studies using Bogaert’s 2004 definition, such as Prause and Graham’s in 2007, or the research done by Brotto *et al.* in 2010, indicate that people who choose ‘asexual’ as their orientation in forced-choice questions often provide other terms to describe themselves when they are given the option of writing their own answers. However, these other definitions include terms such as homoromantic, biromantic asexual, or heteroasexual (Prause and Graham; Brotto *et al.*), which do not strictly point to an orientation other than asexuality – rather, these terms indicate the wish of the asexual people to delineate their orientation clearly, searching for more specific terms to negotiate their identity within the scope of asexuality. Due to the low visibility of asexuality in the media, these terms also point to a certain involvement of these participants in the online asexual community, where romantic orientation and more specific terminology are discussed fairly often.

One of the terms not mentioned by Bogaert, Prause and Graham or Brotto *et al.* that people within the asexual spectrum might use to further describe themselves is *demisexual*, defined by AVEN as follows:

A demisexual is a person who does not experience sexual attraction unless they form a strong emotional connection with someone. It’s more commonly seen in but by no means confined to romantic relationships [...] in general, demisexuals are not sexually attracted to anyone of any gender; however, when a demisexual is emotionally connected to someone else (whether the feelings are romantic

love or deep friendship), the demisexual experiences sexual attraction and desire, but only towards the specific partner or partners.

(AVEN, “Demisexual” n.p.)

Demisexuals are commonly understood within the asexual community as a part of the asexual spectrum based on the idea that sexuality and asexuality are not mutually exclusive, but rather form a continuum. Just as heterosexuality and homosexuality have been described as two extreme points of a scale (Kinsey *et al.*, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*; Storms), sexuality and asexuality can also be viewed as such, ranging from people who “have never felt sexually attracted to anyone at all” (Bogaert, “Asexuality: Prevalence”) to people who feel sexual attraction very often. This scale of sexuality and asexuality indicates that human sexuality is not black and white – instead, there are many gray areas in between, which is reflected in another label frequently found within the asexual community: gray- or grey-aseexual, often used in a shortened form of gray-/grey-A. Considering that this thesis focuses on US culture and media, the spelling more commonly seen in American English will be used, i.e. *gray-aseexual* and its shortened form, gray-A.

People who identify as gray-A can include, but are not limited to those who:

- do not normally experience sexual attraction, but do experience it sometimes
- experience sexual attraction, but a low sex drive
- experience sexual attraction and drive, but not strongly enough to want to act on them
- people who can enjoy and desire sex, but only under very limited and specific circumstances

(AVEN, “Gray-A/Grey-A” n.p.)

In other words, people who experience sexual attraction on the low end of the spectrum may choose to identify with asexuality, since they might “have a lot more in common with asexual people than with non-aseexual people because they expect their relationships to not involve sexual attraction, don’t see their relationships in terms of sexual attraction, or very rarely experience sexual attraction” (Decker 36). Gray-aseexual or demisexual people thus might find it easier to identify as a part of the asexual subgroup of population, even if they do experience sexual attraction sometimes. It might be easier for them to explain their low frequency of sexual attraction and find understanding among people who are more open to the idea that sex is not necessarily required to lead a fulfilling and healthy life. For this reason, it seems impossible to

include criteria such as lifelong consistency in the definition of asexuality. However, the recent changes to the APA's diagnostic manual still operate with the term 'lifelong', even if the DSM-5 acknowledges the possibility of asexuality as an alternative to the diagnosis of sexual desire disorders. Bogaert seems to have abandoned the notion of lifelong lack of sexual attraction in his later works, opting merely for "a lack of sexual attraction" (*Understanding Asexuality* 13) while referring to the same definition provided by AVEN. This also seems to be the conceptualization most widely used by other researchers in contemporary studies pertaining to asexuality (Brotto and Yule; Chasin) as well as by self-identified asexuals when asked for a definition of asexuality (Brotto *et al.*; AVEN), opting not to delineate asexuality in the strict terms of absolute and lifelong lack of attraction.

The asexual community also places importance on the concept of self-identification and defines asexuality "as a lack of sexual attraction combined with one's identification as asexual" (Chasin, "Reconsidering Asexuality" 405). As mentioned above, some researchers report inconsistencies in self-identification (Brotto *et al.*; Prause and Graham), especially in the continuous use of the word *asexual* to describe oneself. However, the labels they report can be viewed as specifying the umbrella term *asexual* instead of invalidating its use as a category. Prause and Graham chose to employ self-identification as the chief criterion for asexuality in their 2007 study, and found that only 17 (41.5%) out of 41 self-identified asexual participants indicated that they experienced no attraction to either men or women – interestingly, two more participants reported no attraction to men or women without identifying as asexual (Prause and Graham 349). Chasin explains these results through the possibility of participants reporting romantic attraction, considering that the survey did not specify attraction as sexual only. It is equally possible that non-self-identified asexual people interpret attraction differently as a result of not being aware of the existence of non-sexual romantic attraction. This points towards an imbalance in the amount of information between people who self-identify as asexual and people who might fit the basic definition, but do not use the term to describe themselves: "self-identified asexuals and non-self-identified asexuals cannot be merely assumed to interpret questions about attraction in similar ways" (Chasin, "Theoretical Issues" 8). Self-identification thus plays a significant role in the construction of the personal as well as public understanding of asexuality. However, if it is to be conceptualized as a sexual orientation, it is impossible to exclude the people who do not self-identify as asexual

from the broad definition. Flore's work relates to Chasin's ideas about non-self-identified asexual people and picks up Chasin's other term, *potential asexuals*, defining them as "people who are asexual but do not identify as such or have never heard of the term" (Flore 158). For the purposes of this thesis, potential asexuals are not excluded from the definition of asexuality, and self-identification as asexual is understood as one of the criteria that can be present in an asexual person, but is not strictly necessary for reading fictional characters as asexual.

Other attempts at defining asexuality in recent studies include the discussion on the importance of *sexual behavior* or activity with regard to asexual identity. In the 2013 article "A Mystery Wrapped in an Enigma – Asexuality: A Virtual Discussion", Bishop interviews the contributors to the *Psychology & Sexuality* special on asexuality. One of the interviewees and a co-author of the issue's editorial, Morrison, observes that

some asexual men and women find sexual activity of any sort to be repulsive whereas others value certain forms of 'sexual intimacy' such as hugging and kissing. Some masturbate and report having sexual fantasies, while others engage in a range of sexual practices because doing so is gratifying to their partner.

(Bishop 198)

While this excerpt points out the wide variety of sexual behavior among asexual people, it also serves to illustrate one of the chief problems with including behavior in the definition of asexuality: that is, the inconsistency of delineating what constitutes sexual behavior and what does not. For example, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines sexual behavior as "any activity – solitary, between two persons, or in a group – that induces sexual arousal" (n.p.). In Scaglia's book *Human Sexuality and Asexuality*, sexual behavior comprises "the search for a partner or partners, interactions between individuals, physical, emotional intimacy, and sexual contact which may lead to foreplay, masturbation and ultimately orgasm" (Scaglia 4). Prause and Graham defined sexual activity for their study as "any contact with genitals or with female breasts [...] including stimulating a partner's genitals or breasts with your hand or mouth, and intercourse" (347). Various types of behavior can be read as sexual by different people; hugging, masturbation, even search for a partner are included in these definitions. In addition, it has been proved by several studies that asexual people may differ from non-asexual people in the way they code behavior as sexual or non-sexual.

As has been mentioned before, asexual people may choose to participate in sexual activities without feeling sexual attraction, or even desire (Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*; Decker; Prause and Graham). Prause and Graham, as well as Brotto *et al.*, interviewed asexual people and found that they often engaged in sexual exchanges because their partners wanted sex even though “sex did not help the interviewed individuals to feel emotionally closer to their partner”, and, most notably, “asexual individuals [considered] fewer activities as sexual” (Van Houdenhove *et al.* 183). This can be partially explained by the heteronormative perception of sex mentioned by Kurowicka:

The blurred and highly subjective line between sexual and non-sexual acts highlights the problems with one of the more persistent dominant assumptions about sex, namely, that ‘real’ sex involves penetration, preferably of vagina with a penis. When asexuals describe their relationships and physical behaviours they engage in it becomes exceedingly clear that what ‘counts’ as sex is inherently individual.

(“What’s Sex Got to Do” 4)

Przybylo discusses the heteronormativization of sex in several articles: according to her, all sexual acts other than penetrative, coital sex are designated as foreplay, helping establish coital sex as the “real deal”, as the most “authentic, healthy, masculine and pleasurable form of sex” (“Masculine Doubt” 230), preferably “leading to a ‘happy ending’ of simultaneous orgasm and ejaculation” (232). It is possible that due to these pervasive societal assumptions, some people can understand certain activities as non-sexual, even if other people might describe the same actions as purely sexual (e.g. kissing, touching, etc.).

Masturbation is also predominantly described as separate from sexual activity among asexual people: Decker explains that “the presence of a sex drive, or a libido, or a desire to self-stimulate, does not disqualify someone from being asexual” (28), due to asexuality being defined as a lack of sexual attraction towards other people, not an inability to become physically aroused or enjoy physical stimulation (Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality*; Decker). Bogaert reports the number of self-identified asexual people who have masturbated at least once at 80% for self-identified asexual men and 70% for self-identified asexual women, and “approximately 40% of people who reported no sexual attraction for others had masturbated in the last month” (“Asexuality and Autochorissexualism” 1513). When questions about masturbation are

presented to asexual participants in surveys, the responses are often “highly clinical or mechanical, using metaphors like ‘clean[ing] out the plumbing’” (Emens 320). In other cases, asexual people report masturbating, but without any fantasies: “for instance, one AVEN member writes, ‘Yes, I masturbate [...] but my mind is blank when I do so. No hot guys or girls or anything in there’” (Emens 320). Despite all these facts, there are also asexual people who do consider masturbation a sexual act, or who use sexual fantasies while they masturbate (Decker 28). Based on responses from the AVEN forum, Bogaert discusses the possibility of sexual fantasies that asexual people report being evidence of a paraphilia, or unusual sexual interest: participants in the surveys often describe having sexual fantasies which do not involve their own identity and are viewed from the third person. Bogaert labels it autochorissexualism, sex without one’s identity, or identity-less sexuality (“Asexuality and Autochorissexualism” 1513), and the category of paraphilias is used as a category of “alterations in the typical targeting process in human sexual attraction. [...] A typical target sequence in humans [is] ‘I am attracted to him/her.’ In those who have alterations in typical target processing, the *I* and/or the *him/her* in this sentence do not operate in traditional ways” (“Asexuality and Autochorissexualism” 1514). Bogaert also mentions automonosexualism as another example, in which a person’s sexual interest is targeted towards oneself instead of towards others. However, the idea that masturbating asexuals may be paraphiliac has garnered some opposition from other researchers. The term remains largely pejorative and understood in terms of disorder and treatment and Przybylo proposes that delegating masturbating asexuals into the category of paraphilias may “function to pathologize masturbation and question, again, the extent to which asexuality is a ‘healthy’ and valid sexual orientation” (“Producing Facts” 11). This suggests that when the idea of autochorissexualism is accepted by a member of the asexual community, it is most likely incorporated into the wide variety of specific concepts and terms one might use while negotiating their identity on the asexual spectrum, such as demisexuality or gray-A, instead of being labeled a paraphilia and understood as a disorder.

That is not to say that no significant debates about masturbation and its position in the formation of an asexual identity have arisen in the asexual community itself. Hinderliter, for example, provides a brief description of the situation in the early 2000s, when several online communities for asexual people were formed. Based on a podcast recorded by David Jay, AVEN’s founder, in 2006, Hinderliter explains that a major split in the asexual community occurred based on the differences in opinion on masturbation

between Jay and another asexual activist, Geraline Levi Jones, also known as Miss Geri or, in her introduction on her now defunct webpage, Geraldin Levi Joosten van-Vilsteren. Miss Geri claimed that people who masturbate cannot be asexual and went to create her own webpage, The Official Asexual Society, later changed to The Official Nonlibidoism Society (Hinderliter 171). This site was deactivated in the following years. AVEN's current position on masturbation explicitly states that "masturbation is not exclusively an act of sexuals" ("Masturbation" n.p.), making it clear that whether or not one masturbates is in no way indicative of their identity as an asexual person.

Miss Geri and The Official Nonlibidoism Society also illustrate an important issue about the process of decision on someone's asexuality. While the webpage was functioning, people could go there to fill out questionnaires and send them to Miss Geri, who would then tell them if they were asexual or not. This placed a person's asexual identity firmly in the hands of others. Jay, on the other hand, insisted that "anyone who felt that identifying as asexual made sense for them should be allowed to do so" (Hinderliter 171). This philosophy has permeated the contemporary asexual community to such an extent that even on websites or social media pages related to asexuality, but unrelated to AVEN directly, the idea that no one else can tell a person whether or not they are asexual is strongly present. Chasin offers a slightly more pragmatic reason for this occurrence. Asexuals sometimes face accusations from the media that the community "inappropriately convinces people to be asexual and, in doing so, allegedly impedes their would-be healthy sex lives" (Chasin, "Making Sense" 10). As this author remarks, these accusations not only stem from the belief that asexuality should only be accepted if people absolutely cannot manage to be, or become, sexual; they also put the asexual community in a defensive position and force them to explicitly state that there are no attempts at converting anyone, "for instance, by insisting that nobody can tell you whether or not you are asexual" (Chasin, "Making Sense" 10).

Asexuality is also not universally acknowledged as a sexual orientation. Despite the fact that Storms included asexuality on his scale as a sexual orientation back in 1980, people are still currently debating its position among other orientations. One of the most prominent arguments is that asexuality should not stand in opposition to hetero-, homo- or bisexuality, but that asexuality should be positioned as opposing to being sexual:

Considering heterogeneity in terms of self-identification with asexuality, romantic orientation, and gender, there is solid theoretical justification for not conceptualizing the asexual population as a single, homogeneous population. Instead, it makes more sense to think of asexual as a meta-category, just like sexual, encompassing the same kind of smaller categories. [...] Nevertheless, while it may be provisionally useful to consider (a)sexual diversity in terms of distinct categories, it is important to recall how these categories are only metaphorically distinct and, in fact, blend seamlessly into each other.

(Chasin, "Theoretical Issues" 9)

Despite the significant variety of terms people in the asexual community can employ to specify and construct their identities, these still have a common denominator of never or very rarely experiencing sexual attraction to others. Because these varied terms are not, in fact, that different from each other, it could be deemed sufficient to theorize asexuality in terms of sexual orientation. After all, a variety of the same extent likely exists within the scope of other sexual orientations as well, e.g. people predominantly attracted to a specific physical trait within their preferred gender or genders, even if they choose not to employ a specific term to signify their preferences.

This dissertation adopts the view that while sexual orientation as such is not necessarily a matter of choice or decision, it is also not required for a person to experience the same type of attraction on a lifelong and unchangeable basis in order to be allowed to identify with a sexual orientation. Just as sexual behavior and sexual attraction do not necessarily have to be in accord, sexual orientation can fluctuate and change over the course of a person's life as new ideas and feelings can be discovered within one's self, and these can alter the self-adopted label fitting that particular person without invalidating labels that might have been employed previously. Due to the fact that sexual orientation seems to be an important part of the construction of a person's identity, it appears beneficial to treat asexuality as a sexual orientation alongside heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and others.

While talking about asexuality as a sexual orientation, it is necessary to mention that the question of whether or not asexuality should be perceived as a disorder is still not closed, despite the recent changes made by the APA in the classification of sexual desire disorders in DSM-5. Prior to DSM-5, Flore mentioned problems with the claim that HSDD and asexuality can overlap, or that asexuality can be simply a variant of HSDD. In that case, HSDD could become the fact from which asexuality arises and would justify the position of asexuality as a disorder in the DSM, as well as placing asexuality into a secondary, inauthentic position as a sexuality (Flore 159). The 2013

edition of the manual, DSM-5, does not really dissuade these concerns, even if it allows for the possibility that a person's lifelong lack of sexual attraction might be better explained by asexuality, in which case the diagnosis of a desire disorder is not made (Emens 312). However, the diagnosis (or non-diagnosis) is still rooted in the expectation of a lifelong and unchanging condition. DSM-5 also divided the previously gender-non-specific HSDD into two separate categories for men and women: female hypoactive desire dysfunction and female arousal dysfunction were merged into a female sexual interest/arousal disorder, while the male category retained the former name of HSDD as a male hypoactive sexual desire disorder. The presence of clinically significant distress is still required for the diagnosis of this disorder; and several researchers point out some problems that might arise with this diagnosis. First of all, distress can be present based on various factors. Nurius pointed out the necessity of considering social expectations and social sanctions as early as 1983, questioning to what extent was the distress reported by a non-heterosexual person caused directly by sexual orientation itself, as opposed to distress being an indirect consequence of norm-breaking (Nurius 132-133). While homosexuals, bisexuals, or other non-heterosexual non-asexual people might experience distress as an indirect result of breaking the rules of heteronormative society, asexual individuals go against the societal norms seemingly focused on sex, and thus can experience distress as well (Yule *et al.* 137). Moreover, Chasin underlines the connection of distress and mental disorder in relation to sexual orientation as an issue previously connected with homosexuality as well. Well after the removal of homosexuality as such from the APA's diagnostic manual in 1973, the remaining category of ego-dystonic homosexuality allowed for the diagnosis of people "who were lesbian or gay and distressed about their sexual orientation" (Chasin, "Reconsidering Asexuality" 412) as having a mental disorder. The APA dropped the use of ego-dystonic homosexuality only in 1987 ("Use of Diagnoses" n.p.). Chasin links this category with the use of distress as a diagnostic criterion for HSDD:

[any] attempts to make a gay person straight are called either corrective or reparative therapy and widely regarded by psychologists and others to be unethical. The days of 'ego-dystonic homosexuality' [...] are behind us, and, as feminists, we would never stand to let them return. Corrective or reparative therapy enacted upon asexual people and a diagnosis for ego-dystonic asexuality should be no different.

("Reconsidering Asexuality" 412)

However, even after the changes made to the DSM, the decision on whether or not a person suffers from a sexual disorder instead of being asexual lies firmly in the hands of the clinician handling the case. The DSM-5 also creates gendered differences not only in the classification of desire disorders, but in the diagnostic criteria as well. The possibility of asexuality instead of the female sexual interest/arousal disorder and male hypoactive sexual desire disorder respectively is described in a following way:

If a lifelong lack of sexual desire is better explained by one's self identification as 'asexual,' then a diagnosis of female sexual interest/arousal disorder would not be made [...] If the man's low desire is explained by self-identification as an asexual, then a diagnosis of male hypoactive sexual desire disorder is not made.
(APA 434-443)

Especially in the case of female sexual interest/arousal disorder, the inclusion of the word "better" leaves room for psychiatrists and psychologists to assess to what extent an explanation of asexuality is deemed more appropriate than treating the person as having a sexual disorder. That is not to say that the statement relating to male HSDD does not allow for a similar possibility in any case – but the formulation does seem to suggest a difference between a state that can be somewhat explained by self-identification as asexual in case of men, and a state that can be seen as better explained by a sexual disorder in case of women. However, the formulation also seems to employ a different scale of how little sexual desire is required for men and women to be allowed to explain their state as asexuality: while the definition for women employs "a lifelong lack of sexual desire", the one for men includes neither the lifelong criterion nor the requirement for a complete lack of desire, instead talking about "low desire" (APA 434-443). This could suggest that women are asked to validate their asexuality through the argument of a lifelong and unchanging state, as well as a complete lack of desire, successfully erasing the possibility of female demisexuality or gray-asexuality. Another conclusion to draw from these differences in wording could be that low desire in men is viewed as similarly clinically significant as a complete lack of desire in women, perpetuating the stereotype that "to 'be a man' is to be sexual, have sex, and overtly perform one's (hetero)sexuality" (Przybylo, "Masculine Doubt" 233).

Another issue arises in the notion of sexual orientation or sexuality being conceptualized as natural. In Bishop's interview with the contributors to the *Psychology and Sexuality* asexuality special, Gressgard explains that "researchers can challenge the

‘pathologization’ of asexuality by questioning the naturalization of gender and sexuality, rather than explaining asexuality as a natural sexual orientation [...] a main challenge is to disentangle sexual from notions of human” (Bishop 199). The last point is highly significant for asexuals, who have been proved to be viewed as less human than people of other sexual orientations in MacInnis and Hodson’s study (2012), most likely due to the assumption that having sexual feelings towards others and/or performing sexual acts holds great relevance for one’s identity as a human being. This preconceived idea is believed to be potentially harmful not only for people who identify as asexual, but also for non-asexual people who experience lower levels of sexual desire or attraction, or do not wish to participate in sexual acts.

The idea that asexuality does not necessarily have to be stable and lifelong ties in with the process of politicization or radicalization of asexuality. Chasin describes this definition as politically safe and conservative, playing into essentialist discourse instead of challenging the traditionally established views about human sexuality (Chasin, “Reconsidering Asexuality” 409-410). Gressgard continues this call for challenging the norm by insisting on asexuality “decentering the human from sexuality and, in effect, breaking with idealised notions of intimacy, family and kinship [...] [which] serves to destabilise the sexual regime (of truth) that privileges sexual relationships against other affiliations” (Gressgard 188). It seems then that the debate on asexuality also happens on a scale: from medicalization, through naturalization, to politicization. Positioning a sexual orientation against a whole system or regime perceived as unjust is not a new concept. Some radical feminist groups employed the idea of political lesbianism several decades ago, e.g. in the pamphlet “Political Lesbianism: The Case against Heterosexuality” (1979), which suggested that all feminists should choose political lesbianism as a way of disrupting the male influence on their lives. Adrienne Rich expressed similar ideas in her text “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience”: she claimed that heterosexuality is enforced on women “as means of assuring male right of physical, economic, and emotional access” (135) and that women who are “imprisoned in prescriptive ideas of the ‘normal’ share the pain of blocked options, broken connections, lost access to self-definition freely and powerfully assumed” (140). A notion that could certainly be employed by the asexual community in general and asexual women in particular, considering that asexuals are often forced to perform the same compulsory heterosexuality, be it in their workplace or in other social situations. Interestingly enough, the aforementioned pamphlet defines a political lesbian

as “a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women” (Onlywomen Press Collective 5), which suggests that the same concept could have also been termed political asexuality, since a woman desiring or participating in sexual contact with women would most likely be termed simply lesbian or bisexual. Some letters of women reacting to this pamphlet suggest that this idea was not met with approval: some of the answers even claim that it goes against feminism itself, against the proclamation that feminism supports women in any situation (Onlywomen Press Collective 13). A similar disagreement could emerge in the asexual community about the question of positioning asexuality strictly as a political notion working against the sexual order of the society. Asexuals in general (e.g. in Decker) seem to favor the idea that society should recognize non-sexual relationships as having the possibility of being equally important as sexual ones. However, the asexual community does not seem willing to stop defining asexuality (in the way Chasin deems politically safe and unchallenging) as a sexual orientation in order to become a political scapegoat in the fight against hypersexualization in the media and in the society.

The need of the asexual community to present asexuality as a healthy and viable option of sexual orientation without making connections to mental disorders, possibility of choice, or ideas that all asexual people are against sexual activity, created the image of an ideal asexual person. Chasin describes the iconic, possibly even stereotypical persona of a real asexual: he or she is someone who has always been asexual and has never been abused, making it impossible to dismiss their asexuality as the result of trauma; they are content as they are, outgoing and mentally healthy, disproving the assumption that asexual people must be unhappy and reclusive, or must suffer from a mental illness. Chasin also mentions that a real asexual should not be repulsed by sex and is old enough that they could have tried to have sex; also, they do not have any physical conditions that could be the cause of their asexuality and could thus be changed, such as hormonal imbalance etc. “In other words, the ‘real’ asexual has all the characteristics of the ideal sexual person but is simply unable to be sexual and, therefore, should be accepted as asexual” (Chasin, “Reconsidering Asexuality” 418). Gender, race and social class come into question here as well, and according to Chasin, those ‘real asexuals’ are typically white, cisgender, educated, outspoken and middle-class. Decker references this phenomenon under the name that she claims is jokingly used in the asexual community itself: a *gold-star asexual* is a person who “lacks all the traits often blamed for asexuality, and therefore supposedly makes a good spokesperson

since they are, for all intents and purposes, unassailable” (Decker 12). This expert also adds physical attractiveness and a complete lack of libido to the traits listed by Chasin. The need for such a spokesperson probably arose from the usual dismissal of asexuality, especially in the media, as a result of a person’s circumstances, such as abuse, mental health problems, old age, or even not being physically attractive enough to engage in sexual activity. However, the usage of these real or gold-star asexuals as spokespeople of the whole community can also lead to feelings of erasure and invisibility for people who do not fulfill all of these criteria, as well as to false inclusion of some groups as a whole into asexuality: for example, trans individuals, older citizens or people with disabilities or mental health issues have often been portrayed as asexual, or the term asexual has been used in relation to these groups pejoratively (Carrigan; Cerankowski and Milks; Prause and Graham; Van Houdenhove *et al.*). For further research, it would be productive to keep in mind that white, able-bodied, middle-class, cisgender people who are comfortable with their asexuality do not represent the asexual community as a whole, which is composed of a wide variety of individuals with different characteristics and lives.

The position of asexuality within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community is also a matter of debate. The main argument against the inclusion of asexuals alongside other sexual orientation minorities often stems from the belief that asexual people do not experience any discrimination based on their orientation, or that they have more in common with heterosexuals than with homosexuals or bisexuals (Bishop; Decker). MacInnis and Hodson addressed the former in a 2012 study and found out that heterosexual people were more likely to discriminate against asexuals than against any other group included in the study (homosexuals, bisexuals, sapiosexuals) with regard to almost every question asked, disproving the claim that asexual people who come out are unlikely to face any discrimination for their orientation. Decker acknowledges that some asexual people might not wish to join an LGBT group and do not feel that they belong. However, many do, if only due to the higher availability of LGBT support communities, with people who also experience non-standard sexual orientation, romantic orientation or gender identity and might thus be more accepting and understanding of the feelings of alienation and erasure faced by asexuals (Decker 45-46). This author also notes that some LGBT group members feel that only asexuals whose identities are in some way related to LGBT should be included (e.g. homoromantic asexuals, trans asexual, etc.), often excluding heteroromantic,

aromantic and/or cisgender asexuals, probably due to the feeling that these groups do not face the same amount of discrimination. Nevertheless, Decker, who identifies as a cisgender aromantic asexual, discloses that she has been harassed numerous times over the years as an asexual activist and even had to pursue legal action in two cases (46-47), shedding some light onto the myth that asexuals who do not show romantic attraction to same-sex partners or do not identify as trans cannot face discrimination or harassment. She explains that some asexuals agree with the claim that they should be seen as belonging to LGBT identities – she cites the 2011 census in the asexual community, where 41% of the asexual respondents claimed that they felt they were a part of the LGBT community (Decker 55). Kurowicka notes that the identity politics of the asexual community is consistent with the identity politics of the LGBT groups, such as being recognized as valid and real, fighting discrimination and achieving equal rights (“What Can Asexuality Do” 26). Chasin lists several of the problems asexual people may face in everyday life pertaining to their asexuality, such as coming out, other people not understanding or not believing their asexuality, people misunderstanding or undervaluing asexual relationships, and “for those asexual people who date, trying to navigate the highly sexualized dating world from an asexual perspective (often when dating a sexual/non-asexual person)” (“Making Sense” 3). This analyst continues to point out that asexuality can be perceived through gender as well, just as other sexual minority identities, due to the fact that

being read as lesbian and gay [...] is primarily about interpreting gender presentation. Furthermore, homophobia, heterosexism, and sexual orientation-focused discrimination are largely based on the social policing of gender [...] often theorized as punitive sanctions against violations of both heteronormative masculinity [...] and heteronormative femininity [...] within an institutionally heterosexual erotic market or economy.

(“Making Sense” 4-5)

Due to this perception, asexual people can often be discriminated against based on their lack of interest in sexual activities, or on the failure to perform heteronormative roles. Przybylo explores this phenomenon in her article about asexual men, in which several of the interviewed male asexuals describe participation in sexual activities as important for male bonding, “and a marker of fitting in with peers, belonging, and coming of age” (Przybylo, “Masculine Doubt” 229). Thus, the pressures of the heteronormative society represent a valid reason for the inclusion of asexuals into groups supporting marginalized orientations, whether they use the LGBT acronym or the newly emerged

MOGAI (Marginalized Orientations, Genders/Gender Alignments, and Intersex), an abbreviation put forward by some online communities who feel that the LGBT acronym has become too convoluted and/or fails to cover the whole spectra of sexual orientation and gender (MOGAI Wikia n.p.). Decker cites census data from 2011, when asexual people were asked whether they consider themselves part of the LGBT community: 41% answered positively, 38% answered ‘No, but I am an ally’, 12% said ‘No’ and 9% chose the option ‘Other’ (55). This result shows that a vast section of the asexual community supports LGBT groups and their members, and a large number of asexual people do consider themselves members of LGBT community.

To briefly summarize the various debates on asexuality and asexual lives and provide a baseline for the analysis to be developed in the second part of this dissertation, the following definition of asexuality has been chosen with regard to the analyzed sources. For the purposes of this thesis, *asexuality* is understood as a sexual orientation characterized by a person’s long-term lack of sexual attraction towards other people, disregarding the frequency or type of sexual activity a person engages in, considering that it has been proved that people can enter sexual relationships or perform sexual activities for reasons other than sexual attraction. Acknowledging the possibility of fluidity regarding human sexual orientation, the lifelong criterion is replaced by the more flexible word ‘long-term’ in order to eradicate the overlap of this definition with the fleeting states of low or no desire towards sexual contact that might occur in individuals of any sexual orientation, and to allow for the existence of specific orientations within the scope of asexuality, such as demisexuality or gray-asexuality. In this thesis, asexuality is perceived as a healthy state which does not necessarily result from a disorder, trauma or illness, but does not deny the possibility of disordered, mentally or physically ill and/or traumatized people being asexual. Self-identification is merely one possible criterion for asexuality, demonstrated by the existence of so-called potential asexuals, or people who do not identify as asexual while meeting other criteria for this orientation. Self-identification as asexual is determined unnecessary for reading fictional characters as asexual; while a person’s inner feeling of sexual attraction to others is the chief criterion for a person’s asexuality, often reflected in questionnaires given to research participants, it is not possible to employ the same methods for determining a fictional character’s orientation. For this reason, the behavior of the analyzed fictional characters will be taken into account.

2.2 Debates about Masculinity

Discussions on gender rarely fail to include mentions of femininity and/or masculinity. However, the study of masculinity in terms of gender is a relatively new concept. While the roots of feminism and women's studies in the Anglophone world can be traced back to the 18th century, e.g. to Mary Wollstonecraft, men's studies emerged much later: "even progressive academic men did not do much scholarly academic work on gender until the 1980s, when masculinity studies provided them a validating professional context" (Kegan Gardiner 4-5). Discussions of masculinity started as a reaction to the changes in society that rendered the old models of masculinity obsolete and opened up debates on gender in general. Todd Reeser in *Masculinities in Theory* uses industrialization at the end of the 19th century as an example of such changes, seeing as "shifting definitions of masculinity, from agriculturally based to industrially defined, led to widespread anxieties as the subjective did not correspond to the ideology of masculinity that was spreading via industrialization" (27). Raewyn Connell maps the course of the 20th century with regard to masculinity in her book *Masculinities*, explaining three main projects related to the field of masculinity studies: the first of these projects was Freudian theory, psychoanalysis and therapy, which rooted the construction of masculinity in the Oedipal love for one parent and hatred for the other, as well as young boys' rivalry with the father and terror of castration (8-9). According to Connell, Freud's work provided the grounds for further inquiries into the process of constructing masculinities, even though Freud himself never fully explored all the implications of his findings. His theory was expanded by others, such as Karen Horney, whose 1932 paper "The Dread of Woman" brought up two important points for the study of masculinity: "the extent to which adult masculinity is built on over-reactions to femininity, and the connection of the making of masculinity with the subordination of women" (Connell 11).

The second important project of the 20th-century study of masculinity was social psychology, centered on the concept of innate sex differences, created by late 19th-century resistance to women's emancipation. Despite the fact that research carried out on the possible differences in personalities, interests, emotions, attitudes and mental abilities of men and women proved no insurmountable split between the two, the idea of innate sex differences has remained a point of interest and around the middle of the 20th century gave birth to the concept of sex role, in which being a man or a woman means

“enacting a general set of expectations which are attached to one’s sex” (Connell 21-22). In the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist critique of the female sex role sparked similar criticism of its male counterpart, e.g. in Joseph Pleck’s *The Myth of Masculinity*, which rejected sex roles and offered the term *sex role strain*, describing the contemporary sex role as “problematic, historically specific, and also an unattainable ideal” (Kimmel and Aronson xxi). Pleck criticized the sex role theory for its assumption that generalized norms are in accord with the reality of a person’s identity and personality, and for “the idea that conformity to sex role norms is what promotes psychological adjustment” (Connell 25).

The third important project of the 20th-century masculinity studies according to Connell are the recent developments in anthropology, history, and sociology. The 1970s call for women’s history predictably led to a similar call for men’s history, and “the central theme of a new men’s history [...] could only be what was missing from the non-gendered history of men – the idea of masculinity” (Connell 28). Anthropology provided insight into different cultures across the world, particularly their religious and kinship structures, which often differed from the established notions of sex roles in the Western society and thus were “a mine of information about the very issues debated by feminism, psychoanalysis and sex role theory” (Connell 31). Sociology approached the societal norms for specific genders from a different viewpoint: while sex role research viewed these roles as pre-existing norms for people’s behavior, sociologists explored “the making and remaking of conventions in social practice itself” (Connell 35).

Searching for a distinct definition of masculinity can prove difficult, as the ones offered by dictionaries are often rather vague. *Masculinity* is explained as the “possession of the qualities traditionally associated with men” (Oxford Dictionaries n.p.), or “the characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for men” (Cambridge Dictionary n.p.). On the other hand, *femininity* is cited to be “the quality of being female; womanliness” (Oxford Dictionaries n.p.), “the quality or nature of the female sex” (Merriam-Webster n.p.). The problem with these definitions arises from the fact that what is typical or suitable for a specific gender varies depending on several important factors, such as race, religion, class, etc. As early as the 1980s, feminist critics pointed out that speaking about a universal experience for all women often left out these important factors shaping one’s identity: “the supposedly universal woman at the center of gynocentric feminist theory has often been privileged along a number of dimensions; for instance [...] she was often imagined as white, Western, and

upper-or middle-class” (Jaggar 5). Furthermore, men have not only been conceptualized in terms of universal male experience, but also universal human experience in general: “if one belongs to an elite class, he assumes his experience to be the experience of everyone [...] Males have often been thought to represent universal experience” (Lange 3-4). Such universality is also hinted at in the preface to Michael Kimmel’s *The History of Men*, in terms of visibility as an individual *versus* visibility as a member of a particular group. While members of minorities are often perceived as representing the whole minority in their views and invisible in terms of their individuality, a member of a majority or of a superordinate group “is usually hypervisible as an individual; indeed, to be a straight white man is to embody exactly what an ‘individual’ is. As a result, one is invisible as a member of a group; one rarely considers race, gender, or sexuality if you are a member of the dominant group” (Kimmel, *The History* x). Kimmel then relates the results of an experiment in which a group of students was asked to write down ten words best describing their identity: interestingly, all female students used the word ‘woman’ to describe themselves, but no male student wrote down ‘man’ in his list. As Kimmel further explains, even if most history books that do not explicitly explore the roles and lives of women can be assumed to be about men, “these books do not explore how the experience of being a man structured the men’s lives [...] American men have no history as gendered selves” (Kimmel, *The History* 3). Thus defining masculinity means looking closely at a gender which often remains invisible as a gender and can be even perceived as universal human experience instead.

Despite this tendency towards generalizing male experience as universal, the very invisibility of masculinity is one of its important characteristics: while traditionally in Western culture women are seen as having a gender while men are supposedly genderless, “the fact that masculinity has tended not to be thought of as gendered is a hole that should draw attention to its very absence. [...] [the] attempts to keep masculinity quiet – without a mark, without a gender – is one of its recurring characteristics that [...] should be studied” (Reeser 9). Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson also stress the importance of focusing gender research on men as well as women, stating that gender influences men’s lives as well as women’s: “it composes a foundation of men’s identities; [...] it structures our interactions with other men, women, and children; [...] it is part of the framework of the institutions that shape our lives” (xvi). The differences among men and among women can be just as great, if not greater, than any differences between men and women: a white middle-class American

man in his thirties will likely have more in common with a white middle-class American woman of the same age than with an eighty-year-old black male farmer in Kenya. Due to such differences in how men negotiate their identities through a variety of factors other than gender, “we cannot speak of masculinity as a singular term, but must examine masculinities: the ways in which different men construct different versions of masculinity” (Kimmel and Aronson xxii).

The definition of masculinity, or masculinities, provided by Kimmel and Aronson emphasizes the possible differences between masculinities with regard to various circumstances of particular men, as well as to the way society prescribes what is deemed suitable for a man in that specific time and location. Masculinities can thus be defined as

the social roles, behaviors, and meanings prescribed for men in any given society at any one time. As such, the term emphasizes gender, not biological sex, and the diversity of identities among different groups of men. Although we experience gender to be an internal facet of identity, masculinities are produced within the institutions of society and through our daily interactions.

(Kimmel and Aronson 503)

In view of the biologically-based claims about innate sex roles, it is important to examine how a man negotiates his masculinity and how society prescribes such behaviors and meanings. Reeser stresses the importance of studying masculinities not only cross-culturally, but also cross-temporally: in the 18th century or halfway across the world, the behaviors seen as effeminate or homoerotic in the contemporary Western society are perceived as affirming one’s masculinity instead. Examining these differences presents masculinities as relative, since “what is taken for granted is not at all a given, but a fabrication or a construct of a given historical and cultural context” (Reeser 2). Furthermore, it is impossible to pinpoint the origin of masculinities in general: “no identifiable person or group of people creates masculinity and then forces people to follow it. Masculinity is far too widespread, diffuse, and complicated for any single person or group to create it” (Reeser 17).

Considering this uncertainty about the origins of masculinity, examining the structures men employ to negotiate their own identity becomes essential. One of the basic structures employed in constructing masculinities is explained by Kimmel as power-based: “the power of men over women; [and] the power of some men over other men” (Kimmel, *The History* 6). Historically, such power struggles become particularly

visible against the backdrop of the 19th- and 20th-century suffrage and Civil Rights movements and the violent backlash against feminism, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Ally, Pansexual, etc. (LGBT+) activism or equality rhetoric: “some men have staked their manhood on the continued exclusion of women from the public sphere, and their relegation to the home. Often this has also meant the continued exclusion of other minorities from claiming their manhood; often anti-immigrant nativism, racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia have disparaged their opponents’ masculinity” (Kimmel, *The History* xi). Through these power relations based not only on gender, but also on ethnicity, race, religion or sexuality, it becomes apparent that while male experience might be often taken as universal, all masculinities are by no means perceived as equal by the society or by men themselves, and it becomes necessary to focus on the various factors shaping male identities, such as race, class or sexuality.

The relations of power are further expanded by Connell, who divides them into four categories: hegemony, complicity, subordination, and marginalization. *Hegemonic masculinity* is defined as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 77). According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is characterized more by its successful claim to authority than explicit violence. It is not uniform, constant or unchanging, but rather “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (77). Thus, the bearers of hegemonic masculinity do not always have to be the most powerful – they can be examples of what is perceived as an ideal of masculinity, such as actors or fantasy figures, or they can be men employed at the top levels of business, military or government institutions, occupying a position of authority. Erving Goffman elaborated on the traits of an ideal American man in 1963, when he claimed “there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height and a recent record in sports” (153). While those ideals might have shifted somewhat in the past five decades, the factors noted by Goffman, such as race, religion, education, employment or physical attributes, still no doubt play an important part in the construction of American masculinities. Sexuality also becomes one of the deciding factors: as Przybylo described

in her article, interviewing asexual men has brought into consideration the fact that “to ‘be a man’ is to be sexual, have sex, and overtly perform one’s (hetero)sexuality” (“Masculine Doubt” 233). For this reason, it can be assumed that while an asexual man might fall into other categories related to hegemonic masculinities, his sexual orientation stands in opposition to the hegemonic ideal of a straight male.

Subordination speaks of gender relations among men that position certain groups as dominant and others as subordinate: according to Connell, the most visible case of subordination in contemporary Western society is the dominance of heterosexual men and subordination of homosexual men. Through political and cultural exclusion, cultural abuse, street violence, economic discrimination and other such practices, homosexual men are positioned “at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men” (Connell 78). Such exclusion is rooted in the positioning of masculinity as the direct opposite of femininity and the stereotypical view of homosexual men as more feminine, e.g. more emotional, effeminate, etc. However, homophobia is not merely a dislike for homosexual men. It is a power struggle on its own, in which displaying overt distaste for effeminacy proves a man’s own masculinity: by insinuating another man is less masculine and thus subordinate to him, a man positions himself as more powerful, more masculine, and dominant. As Kimmel explains, “the great secret of American manhood is: We are afraid of other men. [...] Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (“Masculinity as Homophobia” 147) and such fear leads to the constant need to position oneself as dominant over another individual or another group.

While Connell only mentions homosexual men in relation to subordination, the theory certainly raises questions about the position of asexual men in the hierarchy of masculinities. If homophobia were based solely on sexual attraction of men to other men, then asexual men would certainly stand outside that particular group. However, with homophobia conceptualized as subconscious or deliberate hatred towards men perceived as effeminate or not masculine enough, it is important to note the role of performing male sexuality as a way of establishing one’s masculinity. Kimmel describes ways in which heterosexual men constantly police their own behavior as well as the behavior of other men in order not to be seen as homosexual, i.e. less masculine:

Never dress that way. Never talk or walk that way. Never show your feelings or get emotional. Always be prepared to demonstrate sexual interest in women that you meet, so it is impossible for any woman to get the wrong idea about you. In

this sense, homophobia, the fear of being perceived as gay, as not a real man, keeps men exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity, including sexual predation with women.

(“Masculinity as Homophobia” 148)

If homophobia as a social practice is not rooted in sexual attraction to other men as much as it is in not demonstrating enough overt sexual interest in women, asexual men could very well be on the receiving end of homophobic language and emasculation if they fail to perform such sexual interest to the satisfaction of other males. In this way, asexual masculinity could potentially be categorized as subordinate. Interestingly, the progress of LGBT+ rights in the 21st-century Western societies and the emphasis on sexual behavior among consenting adults, homosexual or heterosexual, as healthy and good could even mean that asexual masculinity would be the one positioned at the very bottom of the gender hierarchy among men. In this, asexual men could be not only members of “one of the last disenfranchised sexual minorities” (Kintisch n.p.), but also feel a sense of disenfranchisement in regard to gender.

Connell’s third category is complicity, explained as the fact that most men gain some advantages from the overall subordination of women, even if they do not actively embody or practice the patterns of hegemonic masculinity, and thus are complicit to the general hegemonic project (Connell 79). The difference between hegemonic masculinity and complicit masculinity is that the latter often involves compromises with women due to social, professional and/or family life instead of “naked domination or an uncontested display of authority”, and many men falling into this category “respect their wives and mothers, are never violent towards women, [...] and can easily convince themselves that feminists must be bra-burning extremists” (Connell 79). The last category in this author’s division is marginalization, explaining the intersectional play of masculinity with categories such as class or race: “marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (Connell 81). The relations of marginalization and authorization can also exist between subordinate groups.

Such practices naturally lead to difficulties in constructing one’s identity in a society where defining oneself in terms of power over women or certain minorities is not as widely accepted as it would have been decades or centuries ago. These difficulties have led to claims of masculinity in crisis:

‘Crisis’ is perhaps the most common term used to describe the state of masculinity in the West today, with journalists, novelists, sociologists, psychologists and other scholars in numerous countries offering various accounts [...] In the United States, for instance, claims that manhood is in trouble have been mounting in recent decades, no doubt as a partial reaction to the modest gains made by women, homosexuals and people of color since the 1960s.

(Forth 6-7)

Tim Edwards further expands this idea in his 2006 book *Cultures of Masculinity*. While a crisis of masculinity could be attributed to the reactions to second-wave feminism and its achievements, such as the shifting position of men in workplaces, family structures, or representation of men in media, in his opinion it “refers more precisely to men’s experience of these shifts in position” (Edwards 14). To explore how men are reacting to these shifts, it is first necessary to take a look at what they are shifting *from*, i.e. what the pervasive, stereotypical, widely accepted traits associated with masculinities in the Western world are.

Kimmel borrows the four basic rules of masculinity from a 1976 book on the male sex role titled *The Forty-Nine Per Cent Majority*, edited by Robert Brannon and Deborah David. The first rule – “no sissy stuff” – immediately reminds us of the previously mentioned homophobia: men should never allow themselves to be perceived as weak, effeminate or gay, and should endlessly strive to be viewed as markedly different from the feminine. This often translates to demonstrations of physical strength and fitness, considering that women are frequently perceived as the weaker sex. As Kimmel points out, “to some men, masculinity became a relentless test, demanding that it be proved in increasingly physical demonstration. From 19th-century health reformers to contemporary bodybuilders, some men have pumped up to regain lost confidence” (*The History* xi). Nevertheless, the relation between the physical body and the construction of masculinity is not as simple as it might appear. While certain aspects of the male body are presented as visual signs of masculinity, Reeser describes how invisibility of the body can function in the same way:

masculinity is also predicated on hiding the male body, as ignoring the male body can reaffirm one’s masculinity. The man who ignores and overcomes his sickness or illness can be seen as masculine, or certain potentially sexual aspects of the male body may be considered something to avoid (e.g., nipples or the prostate). [...] masculinity could [...] ultimately be about the movement of the male body between hiding and displaying.

(11-12)

The difficult position of masculinity with regard to femininity is also apparent in the developments of the modern Western society. Christopher Forth lists these developments as “refined manners and self-control, education and culture, and material comfort and luxuries” (13), traits that have often been associated with women and thus perceived as feminization of men:

Deployed in helping to raise men from savagery to civility, women have been at once celebrated and resented for their efforts, and in some cases have even been blamed as the central cause of whatever men find repugnant about civilization. Women thus stand at the heart of many anxieties about the male body, often as rivals and parvenus, but also as symbols and agents of the very civilizing/feminizing process that elite males have both encouraged and resented since the early modern era.

(Forth 19)

Due to this, it can be expected that some men might attempt to assert their masculinity by behaving in direct opposition to these supposedly feminizing developments, e.g. adopt rough, crude or violent behavior in opposition to the refined manners mentioned above, in order to get in touch with the mythical original masculinity of the sex role theory.

The second rule – “be a big wheel” – suggests the importance of success and the notion that “masculinity is measured more by wealth, power, and status than by any particular body part” (Kimmel, *Guyland* 46). Interestingly, power and success do not necessarily have to be measured by monetary gains or social status alone. Connell describes an unmasculine person in the modern society as “being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth” (67). Aside from aggressiveness, dominance and ability to perform well in sports, sexuality seems to play a significant role in the perception of what being masculine means. Significantly, it is also disinterest in sexual behavior, or sexual conquest, that would make a person unmasculine, not simply inability to perform sexually. However, sexual impotence seems to be linked with power as well: “an impotent man, etymologically speaking, is one without power (*impotens* in Latin means ‘not powerful’), implicitly suggesting that the man who cannot get an erection lacks power, thus that a key characteristic of masculinity cannot be held by the impotent man” (Reeser 30). Sexuality appears to be implicitly connected to power and thus to the construction of masculinities – however, it is perhaps too often

taken for granted. According to Connell, “sexual desire is so often seen as natural that it is commonly excluded from social theory” (74), which is why examining asexual men and how they are both perceived by others and how they perceive themselves and their masculinity might provide interesting answers to the question of how masculinities are constructed by individuals or in media. Asexual men are likely to feel societal pressure about not performing sexuality in expected ways:

His impotence might mean that at other moments he remasculinizes himself in other ways. In fact, he might try to remasculinize the self in sex, looking for other ways to give pleasure to another person and transforming how masculinity is defined. But, on another level, his impotence might be something from which he suffers as he imagines himself as unmanly under the influence of his cultural context.

(Reeser 103)

While Reeser speaks about impotent men here, these assertions might very well pertain to asexuals as well. An asexual man might feel pressured to perform sexually and give pleasure to his partner, even if he himself does not necessarily desire any sexual activity. Asexuality might also result in a feeling of not being manly enough, not so much for failing to perform sexually, but for failing to become interested in sexual conquest.

The third rule – “be a sturdy oak” – means that a man needs to be reliable, tough, confident and self-reliant. Kimmel makes an important point that this rule urges men to resemble an inanimate object, such as a sturdy tree, hinting at the deliberate repression of emotions by men in order to appear more tough, confident, and by proxy, more masculine (Reeser 103). Rebecca Feasey explains that the call for self-reliance among men often means that men are discouraged from forming close bonds of friendship with other men in order not to reveal themselves as vulnerable through speaking about their emotions (23). Being emotional in any way and nurturing enough to care about the feelings of one’s friends are once again traits labeled as feminine and thus undesirable in a man. Men are told to be independent rather than rely on friends or family, rational as opposed to emotional, and competitive instead of forming close friendships: and thus many men often present themselves outwardly as such (Feasey 23).

As much as the ‘sturdy oak’ category demands self-reliance, it also points towards another important aspect of constructing one’s masculinity: reliability. Men are often depicted as the breadwinners of the household, a concept that goes beyond simply

earning enough money to support a family: “it also implies more general protection of other family members, meeting family members’ needs in a variety of ways” (Kimmel and Aronson 108). The concept might have some roots in the evolutionary scheme of men as hunters and women as caretakers, but it is inherently connected to the shift towards market based economy in the last centuries (Kimmel and Aronson 109). Moreover, the distinction between male and female roles and how they are evaluated becomes apparent in this concept as well: “breadwinning is paid work, done in the public sphere; homemaking is unpaid work relegated to the private sphere. Breadwinning is valued and respected, while homemaking is devalued” (Kimmel and Aronson 109). Earning enough to support a family is not only a matter of self-reliance and reliability, but also a way of earning self-respect: Kimmel and Messner mention how low-wage temporary employment is seen as unproblematic for women, but can result in a sense of dependence and challenge to masculinity in temporary male workers (199), and how men take certain pride in being capable of providing meals, cash, or expensive gifts for their casual sexual partners, perceiving these as generosity instead of payment even if the women in question see it differently (404). While the need for men to get a job to eventually provide for a family seems to be less urgent nowadays, when women are every bit as competent, ambitious and career-oriented, in the context of family responsibilities being a good provider or breadwinner still seems to play an important role in the construction of masculinities (Kimmel and Aronson 109).

The fourth rule – “give ‘em hell” – refers to the necessity of taking risks and exuding an air of violence, aggression and daring (Kimmel, *The History* 94). Some scientists even strove to prove a biological basis for male aggression and violent behavior, such as the Y chromosome or levels of testosterone; however, these explanations fail to recognize the differences between masculinities in different time periods or cultures, or reasons why some men remain non-violent throughout their lives or even why some women are violent as well (Edwards 44). These notions and variations suggest that violence or aggression is not a stable male trait, even though it might be stereotypically associated with masculinity more than femininity. Moreover, any explanation of male violence based on the claim that men are biologically conditioned to be violent or aggressive “often removes the sense of agency involved and indeed the capacity of men to change or improve” (Edwards 44). Invoking biological or evolutionary explanations for male aggression presents potential danger not only to the possible future victims of such violence, but also to men themselves: while some men

are no doubt violent or aggressive by nature, others likely find themselves caught between not necessarily wanting to be aggressive, but feeling the necessity of such behavior in order to perform masculinity according to the current societal standards.

While it would be only sensible to presume that the four rules of masculinity have been somewhat altered by the social evolution in the forty years since Brannon and David's book, Kimmel noted in 2008 that it was remarkable and perhaps surprising how little these rules have actually changed (*Guyland* 46). Therefore, if the rules of masculinity themselves have not been modified, the crisis-inducing shift must have occurred somewhere else. Edwards clarifies that the crisis might stem from the fact that masculinity nowadays tends to be evaluated in more negative than positive terms, from the general undermining of traditional sex role distinctions among men and women, as well as from the possibility that "masculinity is not *in* crisis, it *is* crisis" (Edwards 14). Masculinity-as-crisis is explained by the internal conflict men face when attempting to reconcile the public and the personal aspects of their lives: "the perceived problem for men is precisely the sense that successful public masculinity and private happiness cannot be combined as they are quite literally antithetical parts of masculine identity and practice" (Edwards 17). Turning to the question of a crisis of masculinity, John MacInnes argues that masculinity has always been in crisis as a result of the conflict between the idea of equality regardless of sex, and the ideas of sex-based differences: "insofar as we live in societies that are still marked by the material and ideological legacy of patriarchy, we still struggle [...] to reconcile two opposing and incompatible ideas: that men and women are in principle the same [...] and that they are fundamentally different" (11). The crisis of masculinity thus seems to stem from the opposition between the idea of equality and the notion that men and masculinity can only be built through opposition to – and domination of – women and femininity. This notion also gives rise to the question of specific crises that asexual men might experience, i.e. the crisis of the conflict between the public sphere of performing masculinities and the private sphere of an asexual identity which is in direct opposition to the stereotype of male hypersexuality.

Men are taught to act tough, confident and aggressive. Expressing emotion, especially sadness or pain, is seen as weakness and undesirable effeminacy, while the concept of masculine self-reliance and confidence often prevents men from being able to freely ask for help when they are struggling with a problem or a difficult situation. Power, be it in form of physical strength, social status or wealth, is still perceived as key

in formation of masculinities. Kimmel writes that men do not attempt to conform to these rules of masculinity in order to impress women, neither is there any “inner drive or desire to test themselves against some abstract standards. They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men” (*Guyland* 47). It is men themselves who have instilled and perpetuated these rules of masculinity from their position of power, as parents, teachers, advisors, coaches, religious leaders etc. Regardless of the impossibility of finding the origins of masculinities, it becomes apparent that men maintain these stereotypical notions and rules by policing each other’s masculinity. As described in Chapter 1, asexual men might thus be forced to perform sexual interest and participate in conversations about sex in order to appease their male friends, colleagues or family members, i.e. in order to be perceived as masculine by other men.

One of the important concepts of the 21st-century masculinities, related to the concepts of status, knowledge, power and even wealth, and visible also in the television shows to be discussed below, is the concept of geek, or nerd. In the not-so-distant past, being called a *geek* was considered offensive. Originally denoting a carnival performer whose act was odd or bizarre (Merriam-Webster n.p.; Urban Dictionary n.p.), the 21st century shifted the original meaning away from the strictly negative connotations and towards a more mercurial explanation. Some dictionaries list social ineptitude and high intelligence as basic attributes of a geek; others claim that a geek’s main characteristics is their obsessive enthusiasm about a specific subject, often considered odd by a majority of people: computer programming, video games or comic books come up often as examples of a geek’s interests (Merriam-Webster; Oxford Dictionaries). The term is often used interchangeably with *nerd*: some definitions claim that geeks are markedly less intelligent than nerds, and others state that they are the same but ‘nerd’ is a more pejorative word while ‘geek’ carries positive connotations (Oxford Dictionaries; Urban Dictionary). Based on Internet searches, ‘geek’ and ‘geek culture’ seem to be slightly more popular than ‘nerd’ and ‘nerd culture’, and a closer look at the definitions and usage of these terms reveals that ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ have, indeed, become almost synonymous, denoting a person at least slightly socially inept, usually not fitting the standards of stereotypical attractiveness, with interest in technology, science, video games, science-fiction and/or comic books. Kat Hannaford described the modern geek as

someone with a Twitter account, a wide selection of iPhone cases with Mario characters on, a Tumblr log-in or a penchant for ironic t-shirts [...] someone who's vaguely techie, knows how to use the Internet properly, and has an appreciation for ironic throw-backs to their childhood. It also suggests a pride behind the intelligence one possesses. [...] The 'geek' accolade is a badge of honor, people are proud to call themselves one.

(n.p.)

Hannaford also disagreed with the modern over-use of the word to denote a great majority of young people simply for having basic computer skills. She claimed that the word has lost its meaning along the way. So why has an identity label once seen as pejorative or even insulting become an identity many young people willingly claim for themselves, to the point of erasing the original meaning? Bob Mackey answered this question with a simple explanation:

What once made up the exclusive domain of nerdery has gradually filtered its way into the fabric of everyday life. We all grew up with and regularly use computers. Most of us carry a device in our pockets that can access an entire Internet's worth of information at any given time. We obsess and fixate over television shows, movies, and superheroes with an intensity once reserved for comic book store regulars.

(n.p.)

In other words, being a geek has long stopped being an oddity and has become the norm for young people. It is precisely this shift in the position of the geek in popular culture that has allowed creators of television shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* to poke fun at geeks by employing the stereotypical, outdated images of geek culture – social ineptitude, oddness, unattractiveness, or inability to find a romantic partner – and sell it to audiences who consider themselves geeks as well, but are mostly far removed from the portrayed stereotypes. And it is because self-proclaimed geeks comprise such a large portion of the young adult population that it is necessary to look at portrayals of marginalized groups in media targeting this particular audience. The stereotypical image of a socially inept, unattractive, strange geek also corresponds with how asexuals are portrayed and perceived in the media, as Chapter 3 explores.

Furthermore, the concepts of geek and nerd are specifically important for the discussion of the 21st-century masculinities, and also for the study of asexual masculinities. Many young Americans nowadays have at least moderate computer skills and some interest in certain parts of the popular culture: video games, science-fiction and superheroes have moved from the margins of public interest into the mainstream,

which can be seen for example in the exponentially growing popularity of comic- or game-based movies. Being knowledgeable and skilled in terms of information technologies work, such as coding, often results in better job opportunities and higher-paid positions – being a computer geek has become prestigious and even admired instead of reviled and mocked. These skills provide higher social status and wealth, both important factors in creating masculine identities. Similarly, having detailed knowledge about popular culture, such as comic books, movies, video games etc. has become the proving ground on which many young men construct their masculinities, not only through playing video games, but also through demonstrating superior knowledge about a certain topic, fulfilling the expectations of competitiveness and dominance, as mentioned by Kimmel. David Schwartz speaks on the geek masculinities in an article for *Uncanny*, a magazine targeting science-fiction and fantasy fans, i.e. an audience of geeks.

In male-to-male non-sexual interactions, the way nerds tend to engage on shared interests is by challenging one another. These challenges may be casual, but under scrutiny the dominance play becomes obvious. Questions run along the lines of “Have you seen?” “Have you read?” “Did you know?” Each party is establishing the parameters of the other’s knowledge and authority on the topic in question. At some point one of three outcomes takes place: 1) the two accept each other as more or less equals; 2) one establishes dominance but accepts the other as a sort of informal acolyte; or 3) one is humiliated and is forced to disengage. The level of anxiety can be high, but the process is ritualized and familiar [...] Mainstream males interact in very similar ways; it is simply the common ground interests that differ.

(n.p.)

The concept of a *fake geek* often found on the social media is designed to mock someone for not knowing enough about a specific subject. The term is often associated with females who show interest in something deemed a male domain, such as video games or comic books. Women are often insulted, mocked or ostracized on the premise that they are only interested in these things to attract male geeks, which again coincides with Kimmel’s first rule of masculinity – that is, the urge to distance masculinity from femininity, to position women as the unrelatable other. However, men are often treated as fake geeks as well, based on the amount of trivia they can remember about science-fiction shows, comic book protagonists or video game worlds. Geek masculinities are, then, built around the same power relations discussed earlier in this chapter, and knowledge is the measuring unit. Considering the growing popularity of the so-called

geek culture and the media catering to it, it is vital to examine geek masculinities when discussing contemporary gender identities in the US culture.

Seeing as the production of masculinity is based on the prescriptions of a specific society, it is necessary to look at the way that society constructs the image of a man. This construction is visible particularly in the mass media, which are available to large groups of people and as such can shape both the general perception of gender in the society as well as contribute to the way specific people negotiate their own gender identity. This thesis focuses on the US media in general and US television series in particular. Examining representations of masculinities in media is important “not because such representations are an accurate reflection of reality, but rather, because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted social relations, define sexual norms and provide ‘common-sense’ understandings about male identity for the contemporary audience” (Feasey 4).

Television as a domestic medium in the early 1950s was focused primarily on women, and due to the influence of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, so was media analysis at first (Feasey 2). With the emergence of studies of masculinity, the topic has permeated media studies as well, and looking back at the television programs of the end of the 20th century, it becomes apparent that just as television might have influenced the construction of people’s identities, in turn, social change influenced television programming. For example, the women’s liberation movement and the defeat in Vietnam contributed to the emergence of violent adventure movies, such as *Rambo* or *Terminator* in the 1980s (Connell 84), supposed to reconnect strength with the concept of stereotypical aggressive and dominant masculinity. However, one of the most important shifts in the perception of masculinities and their portrayal in media can be witnessed in the media after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. Susan Faludi describes the situation in great detail in *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*: “the last remaining superpower, a nation attacked precisely because of its imperial preeminence, responded by fixating on its weakness and ineffectuality. Even more peculiar was our displacement of that fixation into the domestic realm, into a sexualized struggle between depleted masculinity and overbearing womanhood” (9). The attacks of 9/11 became a reason for anti-feminist tendencies to resurface with renewed strength and the American media either called for the retreat of feminism and reinstatement of ‘manly men’ and ‘feminine women’, or reported that such shifts were already naturally happening immediately after the attacks.

The struggle for equality between men and women was seen as having feminized men and thus left the country vulnerable (Faludi 14). Men were often portrayed as heroic, whether they were politicians, e.g. George Bush, who was called ‘Lone Ranger’, ‘dragon slayer’ or a ‘knight’ (Faludi 47), or workers who helped at the site of the attacks on 9/11, most notably the New York firefighters, cast as strong, stoic heroes in direct opposition to the “touchy-feeliness [...] and the vaguely feminized, rakish man-child of the 1990’s” (Faludi 74), regardless of the firefighters’ accounts of helplessness in the face of the attacks. Any sacrifice, heroic act or contribution women have made during 9/11 was dismissed or omitted from the narrative in favor of describing men as the saviors and protectors and women as the immediate victims of the attacks. The humiliating feeling of helplessness during 9/11 required the media to reinvent the narrative: “if the myth’s constructions ran afoul of the average American woman’s reality, well, defying reality was the point. What mattered was restoring the illusion of a mythic America where women needed men’s protection and men succeeded in providing it” (Faludi 118). Unlike the Vietnam War, for which the American government was widely criticized by the public, the attacks of 9/11 seemed to have united the nation and created “a renewed audience appetite for narratives of conflict, reminiscent of the wave of filmmaking that surrounded American involvement in World War II” (Dixon 1). However, the conflict that the American viewer wished to see was strictly fictional – movies tended to either fall back on historical conflicts, or create surreal or futuristic destruction that was safely detached from the events of 9/11 (Dixon 8-9).

Falling back on the model of masculinity as physically powerful, fiercely protective and dominantly heroic may have provided some momentary relief, or at least a way to navigate and direct the confusion, anger, fear and helplessness that permeated American society post-9/11, but with regard to “a growing tendency to re-evaluate traditional ways of signifying masculinity, for example through showing (some) male characters as exhibiting softer, more ‘caring’ and/or more vulnerable characteristics” (Casey *et al.* 124), it might have created another field of crisis for contemporary American masculinities. Exploring the depiction of men in television shows produced in the decade and a half after 9/11 could provide insight into how men negotiate their identities with regard to the dichotomy of stereotypically stoic, strong, masculine hero and the new image of a more caring 21st-century man.

CHAPTER 3

ASEXUALITY IN THE US MEDIA

3.1 Early Mentions

Through a chronological revision of a selection of news items, journal articles and talk shows, this chapter illustrates the attitudes towards asexuality presented in the media and the shift in the presentation of the concept of asexuality throughout the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Examining the way asexuality is perceived in non-fiction media can provide a basis to approach the discussion about how asexuals are represented in fictional narratives and offer help in interpreting the portrayal of asexual characters on television. The selection of 20th-century secondary sources was limited due to the fact that asexuality as an orientation or as a concept has not been greatly present in media at that time. The section on the early mentions of asexuality thus contains as many relevant articles as it was possible to recover through available sources. The section on the 21st-century representation of asexuality focuses predominantly on the US-based media to provide a relevant backdrop for the analysis of the US television fictions in the 21st century. The articles and television programs selected are presented chronologically and aim to illustrate the most prominent ideas and directions in the development of the media debates on asexuality.

Most of the articles used as secondary sources were found through World Watch, a subsection of the AVEN forum which functions as a library of asexuality in newspapers, magazines and on television. Even in 2017, members of AVEN still express excitement over mentions of asexuality and contribute to the World Watch with links and quotations from relevant media coverage. The World Watch archives are divided based on the year of publication or airing, with the first subsection labeled “Pre-2002”. This can be attributed to the fact that the late 20th-century world, preoccupied with the acceptance and promotion of human sexuality, would not have concentrated in great detail on individuals lacking sexual attraction or seeing no interest in pursuing sexual relations. In addition, asexuals comprise such a small percentage of the population that before the emergence of the Internet, it would have been less likely for an asexual person to meet someone of the same orientation, or even possess the language to describe their experience. Data published by the US Census Bureau provide some insight into the emergence of Internet use among the general population in the United States.

Forty-four million households, or 42 percent, had at least one member who used the Internet at home in 2000. This proportion was up from 26 percent in 1998, and more than double the proportion of households with Internet access in 1997 (18 percent), the first year in which the Census Bureau collected data on Internet use.

(“Home Computers” n.p.)

The asexual community, predominantly based online even nowadays, thus lacked a consistent platform to communicate and connect prior to the beginning of the 21st century. For this reason, any conversation about asexuality happening before the emergence of AVEN would have been carried out mostly on a small, private scale, rarely reaching the non-asexual population through more than firsthand personal contact with a person identifying or behaving as asexual.

Nevertheless, asexuality was not completely absent from the society and, by extension, from pre-2002 media, just as it was not completely absent from academic articles, as we have seen in previous chapters. A 1978 front page of *The Village Voice*, a weekly New York newspaper, held the title “Asexuality – Everybody’s Not Doing It”. In this article, Arthur Bell explored what he understood to be a modern trend of forgoing sexual activity. He interviewed several people, most of whom identified as asexual, even though the understanding of the term seemed to rely heavily on choosing celibacy as a way of achieving greater productivity in one’s career instead of asexuality as an innate sexual orientation. A psychiatrist quoted in the article denied the existence of asexuality, saying that “asexuality means nonsexuality, and nonsexuality doesn’t exist” (Bell 20). Furthermore, he claimed that asexuality or nonsexuality was either a result of various physical or mental conditions, such as diabetes and depression, or merely an appropriate response to an intense environment of working in business and politics. While these claims are less than surprising when examined against the backdrop of the scientific views on asexuality during that period, it is worth noting that the medicalization and dismissal of asexuality continued well into the 21st century.

Additionally, Bell blamed the decrease in people’s sexual activity on overt accessibility of sex in the contemporary society and media, and asked “what makes an asexual[?] Are they spottable? Are they crabby? Serene? Spacy? Are they all Jewish? Do they own lap dogs?” (Bell 1). These questions appear to correspond with some of the most prominent stereotypes about asexuals, such as the belief that they are likely to be unhappy, religious, or somewhat detached from the problems and realities of

everyday life. The detachment was emphasized by the fact that Bell's interviewees were predominantly people working in the entertainment industry – traditionally viewed as bohemian, nonconformist, with unconventional lifestyles. Non-asexual interviewees either urged Bell to differentiate between “impotence, which is not being able to get it up; celibacy, which is self-afflicted abstinence; and dry periods”, making no space for asexuality as it is understood nowadays, or claimed that asexuality was “the first step you take when you decide to become nonhuman” (Bell 20) in an example of sex being perceived as an essential part of being fully human. One writer spoke about how he would prefer to be asexual if he could: “Think of all the time and energy spent in the search and consummation – and the hangovers of sex. Think of the books I could have written, the photographs I could have taken” (20) – while such an assumption could be viewed as stereotypical and harmful nowadays, conflating asexuality with time-saving measures was actually an astute observation considering the responses of the self-identified asexual interviewees in the article. These people did not evaluate asexuality in terms of sexual orientation at all. An owner of a dance club spoke about working 16 hours a day, citing business as the reason for asexuality – the same as an actress who claimed to have no time for sexual relationships in her line of work: “Career takes away from sexual energy. You can either have a nice sex relationship or be completely selfish about your work. You can't have both. [...] There's no time for a man” (Bell 20). Asexuality, or as Bell called it, “the '70s malaise” (20), was portrayed as a rational choice of people prioritizing their careers.

Interestingly, this article also indirectly linked former New York mayor Edward Koch with asexuality. Elected in 1977, Koch served three terms and came to be infamously known as the mayor who in 1981 refused to acknowledge the threat of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immune Deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) epidemic spreading through New York (Humm n.p.). Koch garnered attention in regard to his uncertain sexuality throughout his political career, as evidenced by attitudes presented in *The Village Voice* article. Bell described a situation where a reporter from *The New York Times* asked him for confirmation of the rumors of Koch's homosexuality. However, when Bell replied that there was “no evidence, nothing concrete through the gay grapevine”, the reporter said: “Poor Ed [...] That's what I was afraid of. If only he were gay, or something, or anything. Our next mayor, I fear, is asexual” (20). Frank Langella, a heterosexual Broadway actor interviewed in Bell's article, spoke on the subject of Edward Koch in a similar manner: “I would be

more sad to find that Koch was an asexual than if I knew he was gay” (Bell 20). Asexuality appeared to warrant pity, sadness and even fear, to such an extent that Bell mentioned another reporter who had the mayoral candidate followed for two weeks, attempting to find out about his sexuality – to the man’s disappointment, “Koch did nothing but campaign and sleep” (20). People expressing concern about Koch’s asexuality, even stating that they would be happier if he were homosexual instead of asexual, bring to light an attitude towards asexuality that could very well be connected to the perceptions of masculinity and capability of the mayoral candidate. Subconsciously, the question was not whether or not Koch was hetero- or homosexual: the underlying concern was that if Koch failed to be sexually active or even aggressive, a trait stereotypically associated with hegemonic masculinity, would he be man enough for leadership? Edward Koch never came out and denied the claims of his homosexuality until his death in February 2013, despite several people’s claims in a 2009 documentary that he had a male lover who had to leave New York when Koch became the mayor (Humm; McFadden). Whether Koch was homosexual, asexual, or any other variation of sexuality, the truth is that the articles about his death invariably mention possible homosexuality (if they touch the subject of sexuality at all), despite the fact that in 2013 the asexual spectrum was no longer an alien concept and thus could have been a part of the speculation about the former mayor’s orientation. One possible reason for the omission of asexuality from speculations about Koch’s life is that the journalists writing about the mayor were unable to reconcile the image of a politically powerful male figure with asexuality.

Asexuality did not gain much presence in the media of the 1980s and early 1990s, despite the existence of people who either identified as asexual at the time or would have claimed the label, had it been more accessible or discussed, as evidenced by AVEN’s Older Asexuals subsection. The gradual popularization of the Internet over the course of the 1990s brought greater anonymity as well as the possibility of exploring one’s identity from the comfort of one’s home, and mentions of asexuality can be found in various advice columns of the pre-2002 era. A short article on the webpage *Australians Abroad* from March 26th, 1999 expressed mild dismay over the emergence of asexuality in New York, citing American puritanism and New Yorkers’ lack of time as the main reasons (“The New Minority” n.p.). The anonymous author ironically asked if “there just weren’t enough sexual preference groups around”, then proceeded to speak in a sarcastic manner about advice columns where asexuals were writing with hopes of

having their orientation validated (“The New Minority” n.p.). The cynical question “Why should I take the asexuals more seriously than the amputee fetishists?” insinuates that clinicians and psychologists were not the only hurdle asexual people had to overcome at that time on their way to comfortable vocabulary about their experiences.

A much more direct, and more positive, example of advice on asexuality would be “Ask Beth,” a relationship and sexuality column for teens published in *The Boston Globe*. In May 1999, Elizabeth Winship, the psychologist who ran the column, received a letter from a woman who labeled herself as *heteroplatonic*, a term she used to denote that she desired to have male friends more than female friends, but without any romantic attachment, and asked why people could not seem to grasp the concept of non-romantic friendships with the opposite sex (Winship, “1 May” n.p.). This letter shows that in the last years of the 20th century, people were discovering that the commonly known identities of that time could not accommodate the needs of every human being, and that creating new labels for themselves might be a meaningful and rewarding pursuit. Nowadays, the woman would likely find the term *aromantic* useful: back in 1999, she had no choice but to create her own terminology to describe her experiences. The loneliness of standing outside of any known community of like-minded individuals is apparent from the signature this woman used in her letter: Anybody Else Out There? is a blatant cry for understanding and inclusion. Winship, who was praised for being “modern [...] compassionate [and] tactful” (Dickinson n.p.), responded with advice both worthy of her reputation and yet visibly rooted in the predominant view on asexuality at that time: she claimed that everyone was individual in terms of sex and friendship and advised the woman to meet new people and make friends who would not judge her. While Winship apparently acknowledged the possibility of people experiencing friendship and sex in different ways, she still offered possible causes for the woman’s asexuality, such as meeting the right person or a history of sexual abuse, mental health issues, and hormonal imbalance. However, considering the absence of late 20th-century research on asexuality, one can hardly hold such views against a psychologist writing an advice column nearly two decades ago. It is also worth noting that Winship clearly put the decision about whether or not to seek treatment in the reader’s hands: the wording hints that the crucial criterion for treatment would be the woman’s distress over her asexuality, i.e. the feeling of missing out on something, or a negative self-image caused by her lack of sexual desire.

In October 1999, two people wrote to Winship in response to the letter from May. One of them stated their intent to let the woman know that there were, indeed, more people out there with similar experiences. This person claimed to be asexual and uninterested in romance, while still capable of rewarding relationships. The person also went on to describe that their closest friends did not have any problem dealing with asexuality, even if there were occasionally people who responded with “unkind words” or said “there’s ‘something in my body language’ that makes them suspect that I am gay, or unusual in some sexual way – because few people give a thought to people being asexual unless they are priests” (Winship, “9 Oct” n.p.). The second letter was from Transgendered and No Longer Confused, who suggested that the asexual woman was actually transgender and that she should see a specialist to “explore where her true problem might lie”. According to this person, “many girls like her waste large portions of their life thinking something’s wrong with them because they don’t ‘act like girls’ before discovering that their inner beings are actually male” (Winship, Oct 9 n.p.). Both letters serve as examples of how the public expression of one’s sexuality and romantic feelings can tie in closely with how one’s gender identity is perceived in a heteronormative society, not necessarily only by cisgender and heterosexual people.

From this point onwards, more and more people sought advice on asexuality, whether it was related to their own lives or someone they knew. In 2000, one of the questions in an advice chatroom with Dan Savage, a sex advice columnist, was: “Do you think it’s possible for a person to be asexual?” (Savage, “May 21” n.p.). The person was asking about a male friend who never talked about dating and was seen as effeminate, gay, or an eternal 10-year-old, highlighting the importance of expressing interest in dating, i.e. romantic and/or sexual relationships, for the perception of masculinity in an American male. Once again, a connection was made between a person’s gender expression, in this case that of perceived femininity, and their sexual orientation. Savage’s reply corroborated the assumption of the man’s homosexuality by implying that asexuality is merely a mask to hide one’s actual orientation:

Most of the people I know who are ‘asexual’ had same-sex orientations. When someone denies their sexuality, or denies themselves a sexuality at all, there is usually a reason. Straight people are less likely to feel conflict about their sexuality, so when you meet someone who’s in denial or appears to be asexual, well, odds are better that he or she has a homosexual orientation.

(Savage, “May 21” n.p.)

Savage, who is not a certified psychologist, did not even mention the usual concerns: hormone levels, mental health, or meeting the right person. Instead, his explanation stems from the apparent belief that asexuality equals willful denial, repression, or internal discord with one's homosexual orientation. He offered the same advice in the chatroom in 2003, when someone wrote to demand answers about a colleague's sexual orientation:

Not that it matters, but the million dollar question around our office is the sexual orientation of one of our co-workers. Our office is pretty open, (there are many open heterosexuals among us), but this one guy is a complete mystery. There are even some who postulate that he is asexual.

(Savage, "March 5" n.p.)

Despite the fact that the message started with words "not that it matters", by the end it became clear that this person's orientation did matter to all the colleagues, acquaintances and friends who wanted to figure him out and were willing to spend quite some time speculating, even asking Savage for advice on how to proceed in solving this mystery. Savage's reaction was slightly contradictory: on the one hand, he advised the people to leave their colleague alone and stated that "when he wants you to know about his sexuality, he'll tell you" – on the other hand, he rehashed his previous ideas about asexuality being nothing more than a cover for homosexuality and said "were this person my co-worker, I would assume he was gay and let it go at that" ("March 5" n.p.). It is interesting to note that in both instances when someone wrote to Savage about an acquaintance's possible asexuality, it was about a male friend or coworker, indicating that a man not displaying sexual interest in women was immediately a source of suspicion about his sexual orientation, labeled effeminate, childish, or a mystery to be figured out at all costs.

Despite Savage's questionable advice given about potentially asexual people, neither of these instances came close to his reply to a 2003 letter from a young man who sought advice on how to establish close, intimate relationships with other men without sex. The column was originally posted on a gay-oriented website *PlanetOut.com*, which is now defunct. The young man, who called himself Andrew, explained that despite being emotionally and sensually attracted to other men, sexual relationships were always frustrating for him, and that he wanted "a meaningful, long-term, monogamous relationship that's intimate but nonsexual" ("Action Alert" n.p.). He did not ask for orientation on how to change these feelings, but wished to know how he could find

someone who wanted similar things out of a relationship. Savage's response was aggressive and dismissive from the start: he claimed that "healthy, functional people" only had intimate nonsexual relationships with friends and family, and called Andrew "one fucked-up dude". Then he proceeded to inform the young man in a condescending tone that unless he found "a guy who got his balls shot off [...] [he was] unlikely to ever meet a guy who will settle for the screwed-up non-sex life [Andrew was] proposing", indicating that it was impossible for any man to be content without regular sexual activity. Savage concluded the letter by advising Andrew to seek out psychological help and until then "not to inflict yourself on anyone" ("Action Alert" n.p.). This piece was seen as not only misinformed but also highly offensive in the asexual community at the time. Several AVEN members chose to send their own letters to Savage, explaining that Andrew's story was similar to stories shared by people on their network, and asking Savage to inform Andrew about the asexual community and the AVEN forum. At least one of those letters was published and Savage responded to it with a short "Thanks for sharing" ("Action Alert" n.p.). Nonetheless, Savage's reaction is interesting from an academic point of view: an openly homosexual man and an LGBT activist, he responded to asexuality in a violent, dismissive manner, similar to the way a homophobic journalist would likely have reacted to questions about homosexuality. That a man's disinterest in sex would create such backlash supports the possibility of asexual masculinities being in a position of subordination, not only with regard to hegemonic and/or heterosexual masculinities, but to homosexual masculinities as well.

As illustrated by the previous example, the early 2000s marked the emergence of online asexual communities, which immediately began to play significant roles in conversations on asexuality. In 2000, the Yahoo! group *Haven for the Human Amoeba* was started, followed by David Jay's founding of the webpage *Asexual Visibility and Education Network* in 2001 and the creation of the AVEN forum in 2002. These websites increased the opportunities that asexual people had of finding someone with similar experiences, and also created the possibility of others finding information on asexuality. The reactions in the media were often satirical, mocking asexuality and asexual individuals. A short article published in 2002 by the satirical news site *The Daily Probe* described a fern coming out as asexual (Gallagher n.p.). In this instance, asexuality was linked to plants, most likely due to the earlier use of the word only in terms of the asexual reproduction of certain organisms, insinuating that claiming this word to describe human sexual orientation was viewed as ridiculous. While not a

positive depiction of asexuality, the article is nonetheless worth mentioning, suggesting that asexuality in 2002 was present in the public consciousness enough for such an article to be considered amusing.

One of the first mentions of asexuality on television had a satirical twist as well. In 2003, *The Late Late Show*, an American television talk show on CBS, aired a comedy spot starring its host at the time, Craig Kilborn, in the role of Sebastian the Asexual Icon. While Kilborn indeed allowed for the possibility of human asexuality, his performance gave way to several misconstrued ideas about what it meant to be asexual. First of all, it is again noteworthy that Kilborn chose to satirize an asexual man as opposed to an asexual woman: it is unclear whether the choice was made simply because Kilborn himself is male and thus portraying a male character would be a natural, gender-based decision. Kilborn could also have chosen to satirize an asexual man because the idea of a man without sexual urges was more ridiculous than the idea of a woman in the same position. As Kimmel states, men are taught to always be ready to demonstrate overt sexual interest in women in order to prove their masculinity (“Masculinity as Homophobia” 148) and thus might have trouble internalizing the idea that there could be men who do not feel sexual attraction or the need for sexual activity. When taking into consideration also Dan Savage’s reaction to the suggestions of asexuality, it becomes clear that sexual activity and the display of sexual interest plays a great role for the negotiation of masculine identities, be it hetero- or homosexual, which positions asexual masculinities as marginalized and often met with almost violent opposition.

Such violent opposition is clearly present in Kilborn’s satire as well, dehumanizing and degrading asexuals with vicious exaggeration. Sebastian, the caricatured representation of asexuals, is shown wearing a blazer, a silk scarf and small oval glasses, holding a rose, often pursing his lips in contempt after delivering the lines. Each line is followed by the words “Asexual Icon” floating over the screen with a hushed, sensual voice reading them out loud. The usage of the word “icon” in this context suggests that Kilborn perceived asexuality as a modern trend people chose to aspire to, or a misguidedly idealized – and idolized – occurrence. The spot starts with Sebastian announcing “when I was twelve, I was about to go through puberty, but it jumped out of the way” (Kilborn n.p.), implying that asexuality is caused by a person missing puberty or failing to reach a healthy stage of adulthood. Asexuality is clearly portrayed as unhealthy. Kilborn suggests that not experiencing the sexual awakening

commonly associated with the teen years is a medical problem, that asexuals simply fail to understand and perform their sexuality, and that asexuality must be depressing, lonely or tragic enough to drive a therapist dealing with an asexual person to suicide: “In high school, I was excused from gym class with a doctor’s note reading ‘This boy’s groin is a parched wasteland.’ [...] I am sorry, I cannot give you a ride – I lost the keys to my libido. [...] I was seeing a therapist until he shot himself” (Kilborn n.p.). The spot also mocks other aspects of asexual experiences by presenting them in absolute extremes, such as discomfort at the hypersexualization of the media and the society: “I never saw the film *Ed Wood* because the word ‘wood’ makes me extremely uncomfortable” (Kilborn n.p.). Asexuals, according to Kilborn, have unhealthy relationships with their own bodies to the point of constantly fearing infection, being disgusted by their own genitals, and even wishing they did not possess any genitals to begin with:

I do not wear undergarments – instead I choose to completely cover my body in alternating layers of saran wrap and Neosporin. [...] Whenever I have the urge to touch [my genitals], I mace myself. [...] You don’t know how many times I wished that instead of genitals, I could have a third pinky, so I could hold just one more teacup.

(n.p.)

Even this satirical depiction of asexuals does not take into account the possibility of a man who does not feel the need to at least masturbate, once again proving the strong subconscious link between masculinity and sexuality in people’s minds: Sebastian feels the urges, but chooses to employ violent means of preventing himself from masturbating instead. Furthermore, an asexual person according to Kilborn has no understanding of sexual clues or erotic imagery: “My opinion on the most erotic film of all time is *Tron*. [...] Whenever I watch a woman eat a popsicle, I think ‘honey, we all know what that’s about.’ Refreshment” (n.p.). While it is true that asexual people sometimes report a somewhat lower ability to understand social clues related to dating or sexual advances of others, Kilborn’s satire shows asexuals as completely incapable of perceiving which film could be considered erotic – citing *Tron*, an American sci-fi film about a man who is downloaded into a computer program, as erotic – or how other people might comprehend certain situations, which is inaccurate. The three-minute spot, one of the first appearances of asexuality, and specifically male asexuality, in popular media, thus could have influenced public opinion and set back any efforts of the asexual

community to be accepted, by portraying asexuals as unhealthy, depressing, boring, immature, ridiculous, and socially clueless.

A 2003 article published on the *ZoraMagazine.com* website expanded upon the myth of a robot-like asexual. In four parts, Anders Porter described life in the future on the example of Zachary429, an extremely efficient, yet somewhat dehumanized fictional worker. Again, like with Sebastian, the character employed to illustrate the ridiculousness of asexuality is male. Efficiency seems to be the main theme of the article resembling science-fiction: humans of the 26th century are portrayed as robotic, meticulous, efficiency-oriented, and leading completely sexless lives in which desire is fulfilled in seconds through virtual reality modules. Porter not only perpetuated the idea that a life without sex must be mechanical, artificial, and robotic – traits also associated with the characters analyzed in this thesis, as will be shown in coming chapters – he also exaggerated the prevalence of asexuality, claiming that humanity could be well on the way towards an asexual society. This idea stems from the belief seen in earlier articles: that asexuality is a lifestyle created by the oversexualized society and people’s incapability to balance a career and a romantic, sexual relationship. At the beginning of Part 3 of the article, Porter clearly addressed asexuality as a sexual orientation and went on to claim that “since there are such differing degrees of heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality, it makes perfect sense that asexuality should consist of varying degrees as well” (n.p.). However, this somewhat tentative, surface endorsement of asexuality does not hold up under closer observation. The cornerstone of Porter’s future asexual society appeared to be thinly-veiled fear of social changes perceived as a threat to the traditional lifestyle:

[T]he desires of men and women are changing rapidly. Many women are making the choice to pursue careers instead of sexual relationships. Those who are adamant about this, but still feel the need to raise children are doing so with the help of [in vitro] fertilization and surrogate mothers. Many men have adopted misogynistic attitudes and can’t stand the thought of assuming parental roles at all.

(n.p.)

This writer justifies male misogynistic attitudes as understandable in the face of societal change, a mere result of men’s fears in the face of such changes: fears of not being needed – or wanted – by women or of losing their individuality, one of the important factors in the negotiation of masculinity. Porter’s further descriptions of how a man can turn from a bachelor to a groom through one sexual encounter, or how sexually

transmitted diseases can make sex inefficient and cumbersome, contribute to the assumption that “a brief encounter in the sack can lead to a sometimes less than desirable lifestyle change; a tendency towards asexuality is therefore quite comprehensible” (Porter n.p.). Indirectly, the author states here that married life and/or the life of a father is less than desirable and asexuality could be a way to avoid such entanglements. Asexuality, according to Porter, is a natural, evolutionary reaction to overpopulation and time demands of a career, and sexual desires can be easily satisfied by masturbation “without any small talk, without any lengthy candlelight dinners, without any unneeded embarrassment, and all in the comfort of home-sweet-home” (n.p.). This author’s depictions of romantic encounters (or the efforts leading up to a sexual encounter, such as dinners or talks) as bothersome and exhausting also seem to grow from the author’s own disillusionment with the process of dating, as well as from his biased captivation with asexuality as an ideal state of avoiding the efforts of entering a romantic or sexual relationship. In conclusion, his reasoning behind allowing for asexuality is obviously the stereotypical belief that asexual lives might be unnatural and robotic, but at the same time, could be significantly more efficient, more comfortable, and easier.

That is not to say there were no articles describing asexuality in a more positive light. “Is It Possible to Be an Amoeba at Bowdoin?” was the title of a 2002 article published in *The Bowdoin Orient*, a student-run weekly newspaper of the Bowdoin College in Maine. Kara Oppenheim interviewed several students in order to answer the question of whether or not human beings could really be asexual. The author observed that asexuality “is especially enigmatic in a college environment where hormones are raging” (Oppenheim n.p.); however, students seemed to be fairly accepting of the idea of asexuality as a valid sexual orientation. Interestingly, the article does not provide any direct statements from either of the supposedly asexual students, Claire and Andy, claiming that they identify as asexual. Oppenheim described only the confusion among their friends, who were curious about the sexual orientation of someone who went out to parties or was considered attractive, yet never flirted, had crushes or showed any interest in sexual relationships at all. The only direct quote about Andy comes from a non-asexual female friend of his: “I thought he might be shy, but finally his roommate explained to me that that’s just the way Andy is. He’s asexual. We’re still good friends, but I just had to come to terms with the fact that nothing is ever going to happen” (Oppenheim n.p.). All in all, this article seemed to point towards acceptance of

asexuality among students, as well as towards potential difficulties in claiming asexual identity for oneself.

With the slowly growing community of AVEN, David Jay, the founder of the website, became the go-to spokesperson for articles about asexuality. In September 2003, Eli Kintisch wrote on the subject for his blog at *Nerve.com*, an online sex magazine for men and women. He explained an asexual person as “someone who doesn’t want to have sex, doesn’t plan to, and doesn’t see anything particularly wrong with that” and linked the asexual community to the struggles of homosexuality in the past: “could asexuals be one of the last disenfranchised sexual minorities? [...] it’s not difficult to think that asexuality is where homosexuality was five decades ago: fundamentally misunderstood, and the target of scientific attempts to explain it away” (Kintisch n.p.). Such a comparison proves doubly intriguing through the lens of gender when homophobia is taken into account as an important stepping stone for the negotiation of masculinities in the contemporary Western world: if homophobia, as discussed in previous chapters, can indeed be perceived as a defining element of a man’s masculine identity, and if asexual men are perceived with a similar level of mistrust, disbelief and ridicule that has been historically aimed at gay men, then the masculinity-defining homophobia can include attitudes against not only gay but also asexual men.

David Jay was also invited to several television shows or documentaries about asexuality. The Canadian Discovery Channel’s show *The Sex Files* produced an episode titled “No Sex Please”, which aired in Canada in October 2004. The documentary introduced asexuals as people “saying no all the time” (“No Sex Please” n.p.), and included many highly sexual images, such as naked bodies or people kissing and touching each other. Such visuals were shown even while interviewing asexual people, possibly out of concern that talking about asexuality would not be interesting enough for a show called *The Sex Files* without erotic imagery to contrast with the ideas that some people simply did not feel sexually attracted to others. This only contributed to the overall tone of the documentary, seemingly supportive of the idea that having – and wanting to have – sex is natural and healthy for every human being. The creators interviewed people in the street, asking about their opinion on asexuality. The responses were invariably skeptical towards the idea, with statements such as “people need to have sex to enjoy life [...] I don’t know that asexuality is a normal thing [...] it’s healthy and good to be sexual” (“No Sex Please” n.p.). One woman expressed the belief that

working mothers with children tended to be asexual, which could stem from the earlier depiction of asexuality mentioned in the articles above: that asexuality was a choice one made because of other time-consuming pursuits, such as career, or in this case, childcare. This assumption also shows that perceiving women as asexual, especially women with children, could be slightly easier for the general public than perceiving men the same way.

Ava Cadell, a sexologist interviewed in the episode, stated that the interesting thing about sex was “the more you have, the more you want, and the less you have, the less you want” (“No Sex Please” n.p.), obviously aiming to prove asexuality as implausible by insinuating that asexual people would start craving sex if they only tried it often enough. Another psychologist, Patrick Carnes, specialized in work with sex-repulsed people who found the thought of sex intolerable, and he pointed out that it was difficult to study an absence of something, because culture was not interested unless someone was a sex offender or harassed someone else. According to Carnes, he would often hear the statement: “While I don’t need sex, I’m not unhappy about it” (“No Sex Please” n.p.) only to later find that the person was suicidal, depressed, or manifested post-traumatic stress disorder because they were sexually abused as a child or they were a sexual assault victim. Adding to the idea that asexuality is a choice one makes to dismiss mental health problems or ignore traumatic events, Carnes claimed: “It’s hard to work with people who really don’t want to change it, and so there’s not that motivation to do therapy. However, there is a large number of people out there who have made those statements and they know that it’s not true” (“No Sex Please” n.p.). While it is not impossible that some people might have chosen to identify as asexual as a way to cope with past trauma, such claims were harmful to the asexual community in more than one way. First, Carnes mentioned the lack of motivation as the only reason why therapy might not be successful, suggesting that asexual people could be changed if they so desired. Second, claiming that it was a large number of people implied that a lot of asexuals were merely misguided instead of exploring and discovering their sexual identity. It is understandable that a psychologist used to dealing with people who did have a history of sexual abuse or sexual trauma would seek the same justification for every person not interested in sex, but such presentation of asexuality in mass media contributed to the continuous public disbelief towards the concept of asexuality as a sexual orientation.

The last part of the documentary focused on a condition called sexual anorexia, resulting in self-loathing and voluntarily starving oneself of sexual contact “in the midst of plenty” (“No Sex Please” n.p.). The creators interviewed Harry, a man who avoided any kind of sexual contact as a way to feel superior over people who got married, divorced, and later had to pay alimony. Later on, he realized that he was missing out on the spiritual connection shared through physical intimacy and was in recovery by the time the documentary was shot. The film further claimed that “unlike the asexuals we met earlier, [Harry would] like to eventually have a *healthy* sex life” and that asexuality might mean “going solo forever” (“No Sex Please” n.p.). Statements such as these, together with the inclusion of a sexual disorder in an episode predominantly focused on asexuality, once again pushed asexuality beyond the margins of what is healthy, and portrayed sex as the ultimate way of achieving a connection with another human being.

3.2 Recent Media Coverage

After the publication of Bogaert’s paper “Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample” in August 2004, followed by a feature on asexuality in the *New Scientist* magazine in October of the same year, there was a marked increase in the coverage of the subject in the media. A lot of the articles were Canadian and British, likely due to Bogaert’s affiliation with a Canadian university and the *New Scientist* being a UK-based magazine. Scientific studies of asexual behavior in animals were also called upon to lend academic plausibility to claims of asexuality as one of the orientations occurring naturally, and several academics spoke in favor of more research on the subject (Westphal n.p.).

American newspapers picked up articles about asexuality several months later than their British or Canadian counterparts. *Times Union*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *Kansas City Star* all ran the same article in May and June 2005. In the same year, an article on asexuality appeared also in *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, a free alternative newspaper. Written by Deborah Giattina, the article focused on asexuality within the context of queer communities. It is worth noting that Giattina, who spoke of LGBT experiences as “ours”, thus presumably queer-identified, titled the article “Asexy New Friends”, indicating a positive stance towards the inclusion of asexuality within LGBT spaces. This was reflected in the overall tone of the text as well: she observed that “the queer community spends so much time advocating for our right to get it on, maybe it unintentionally dismisses those who just want to play Scrabble and call it a

night” (Giattina n.p.). The word “unintentionally” seems to be key in the sentence: the author presented the potential erasure of asexuality from queer discussions as more of an oversight, rather than deliberate exclusion. The author seemed to advocate inclusion and understanding instead of the often-practiced gatekeeping and decision-making on who was or was not queer enough to fit within the queer community. She also expanded on the asexual community’s feelings towards being counted among the queer population, citing polls found on AVEN, which had roughly 4,000 members at the time. Looking at the answers to these polls in the AVEN Census from 2014, it is apparent that the attitudes of the asexual community have shifted with the growing number of AVEN members. As opposed to Giattina’s findings that a half of the asexual respondents wanted to be included under the LGBT+ umbrella, in 2014, 88% of the respondents in the census answered that asexuality should be included, with another 5.2% stating that at least certain types of asexuality should be included. In addition, 52.1% of respondents considered themselves a part of the queer/LGBT+ community, with another 17.1% who considered themselves allies (“The 2014 AVEN Community Census” n.p.). Nonetheless, Giattina’s findings in her article, as well as Jay’s warning about placing identities on people, provided insight on the unique position of asexuality in 2005, and likely even nowadays: asexuality is the only sexual minority whose members, especially heteroromantic, aromantic, and cisgender individuals, can claim to be queer and non-queer at the same time, with equal validity to either statement.

Other articles from the same time, however, proved that while some members of the queer community might be accepting of asexuality, this orientation was far from being acknowledged by the general public in 2005 or 2006 and was still perceived as nonexistent or unhealthy (Alexander; Duenwald). Despite the vaguely unsupportive perspective, 2006 marked an increase in television coverage on asexuality. American Broadcasting Company (ABC) invited David Jay to their daytime show *The View* to speak on behalf of the asexual community in January 2006. He did his best to explain the asexual identity and what it entailed, but was constantly interrupted by the hosts, especially Joy Behar and Star Jones, with biting remarks posing as genuine questions. Behar asked why asexuals needed to organize if asexuality was not a problem, and when Jay attempted to respond by saying that asexuality was not being talked about, Jones interrupted with: “If you’re not having sex, what’s there to talk about?” (*The View* n.p.), resulting in laughter from the audience as well as fellow hosts. In another instance, Jay’s recounting of his teenage years and the difficulties arising from not

having any way of defining or understanding himself was addressed as possible repression. Behar suggested that Jay simply did not want to face what sexuality might look like, and implied that her suggestion solved Jay's perceived problem as a therapist no doubt would by jokingly asking Jay to pay for the advice: "That'll be a hundred dollars, thank you" (*The View* n.p.). Questions of masturbation were not avoided either: when Jay attempted to answer in general terms, speaking on behalf of other asexuals as well and stating that some asexuals masturbated while others did not, the show's hosts were dissatisfied and requested that he speak about himself personally, and, by proxy, validate or invalidate his asexuality in this way. Jay's admission that he did, indeed, try masturbating and that it was, in his own words, "alright", was immediately linked to the possibility that he had sexual feelings after all, dismissing the differences between sexual attraction, sexual desire and sexual behavior. While Jay explained that a sexual relationship required a lot of energy that had to be expended on thinking about sex, Behar reacted with affront: "So are you just lazy or what?!" (*The View* n.p.). Jay then went on to speak about the differences between a person's internal feelings and outward behavior and Behar interrupted him again, asking how it was possible for asexual men to compromise in a relationship with a non-asexual person: "I can see it for a woman, you know, she can just lie there, but you?" (*The View* n.p.), hinting that it was more acceptable, or at least conceivable, for a woman not to like sex and pretend interest for the sake of her partner. Jay related the compromises asexuals made to the way gay men could have sex with women, but Behar argued that the gay men who had sex with women could imagine other men, illustrating how the mental and the physical part of sexuality were inadvertently linked in people's minds. At that point, Jones and another host seemed to be more or less accepting of the idea of asexuality as a valid sexual orientation and their questions expressed genuine curiosity, unlike Behar's mildly patronizing attempts to prove that Jay was not, in fact, asexual: such as her asking whether he liked kissing or cuddling with a girl. When he answered affirmatively, Behar seemed very pleased with this revelation and expressed the belief that a girl getting aroused in Jay's embrace might change his mind, perpetuating the stereotype that a man should always be ready to have sex, especially if a woman expresses interest. This stereotype is also one of the rules of masculinity described by Kimmel: "Always be prepared to demonstrate sexual interest in women that you meet [...] the fear of being perceived [...] as not a real man, keeps men exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity, including sexual predation with women" ("Masculinity as Homophobia")

148). Due to this perception of sexual predation with women as one of the inherent parts of masculinity, it is impossible for Behar to imagine that Jay, as a man, would not become aroused or interested in sexual activities if he had an attractive and willing female partner. This not only points to the heteronormative perceptions in media, where it is assumed that a woman, not a man, would change Jay's mind – it also shows how integral sexuality is to the construction and perception of masculinities.

ABC also presented a segment on asexuality on their prime time news show *20/20* in March 2006, in the 30th episode of the 27th season titled “Life without Sex, Self-Defense Gone Too Far, Luck and Love”. Asexuality was labeled an odd choice and introduced by one of the co-anchors, Elizabeth Vargas, with sensational condescension: “They say sex is highly overrated. Although, how would they know? Some of them have never even had it!” (“Life without Sex” n.p.). No significant distinction was made on the show between sexual attraction, desire, and behavior. Six asexuals including Jay were interviewed in much the same tone that Vargas used when introducing the segment, reflecting incredulity of the host at the idea of never having been sexually attracted to anyone. Juju Chang, one of the reporters, wondered what might “cause” asexuality, citing “hormones, genetics, personal experiences” (“Life without Sex” n.p.) without even mentioning the possibility that neither of the above might be the correct answer. The show also interviewed a sex therapist, Joy Davidson, whose opinions were easily comparable with Dan Savage's, similar in their vicious denial of asexuality as a sexual identity and the strong belief that being asexual was somehow unhealthy and wrong. Davidson also conveniently omitted the existence of asexuals who did have sex in the past, or who still had sex as a compromise with a non-asexual partner, stating that “sex is a fabulous, enormously pleasurable aspect of life and your saying you don't miss it is like someone, in a sense, who's colorblind, saying ‘I don't miss color.’ Of course you don't miss what you've never had!” (“Life without Sex” n.p.). Davidson's statement would then mean that once someone had sex, there was no possibility of them not missing the activity or not wanting to do it again, or that asexuals needed to be cured of their asexuality in order to see how unhealthy they had been. Such an attitude is uncomfortably similar to the attempts to cure homosexuality in the previous century and indicative of the problematics of corrective rape, one of the most worrisome problems asexuals have to face. Davidson further expanded on the perceived unhealthiness of asexuality by suggesting trauma, abuse, repression, hormonal imbalance, or overt religiousness as the reasons that predisposed asexuals to “shutting

down the possibility of being sexually engaged” (“Life without Sex” n.p.), putting asexuality in the position of a defense or coping mechanism in the face of traumatic events. Chang then verbalized the fears of some clinicians that self-identifying as asexual without first undergoing treatment for a sexual disorder or attempting to become sexual could lead to mislabeling oneself, or that identifying as asexual might prevent people from pursuing sexual relationships they would have otherwise pursued. Davidson’s answer was predictably hostile towards asexuals, describing them as “not curious, unadventurous, narrow-minded, blind to possibilities [...] sexually neutered” (“Life without Sex” n.p.). By doing so, Davidson aligned asexuality with fear, repression, and incapability of having or enjoying sexual relations rather than its standard definition as a lack of sexual attraction, while also suggesting that if a self-identified person would just be adventurous and open-minded enough, there had to be someone they would want to have sex with. The *20/20* segment ended with the report on an engaged asexual couple who were exploring the possibilities of a sexual relationship: they had not had sex yet, but after the filming of the show, they were said to have removed themselves from the asexual community. On one hand, the other interviewed asexuals did not react negatively. Jay even explicitly stated that all members of the community were free to explore their identities further, which could have served to negate the fears of the sex therapists that people might mislabel themselves as asexual and never explore any other possibilities. On the other hand, the general public could have gotten the message that after all, asexuals were simply waiting for the right person with whom to be sexual.

An early evening show of the MicroSoft National Broadcasting Company (MSNBC) with Tucker Carlson invited Jay to talk about asexuality in March 2006. Carlson expressed just as much disbelief over asexuality as ABC’s hosts, articulating the stereotyped belief that men were hypersexual by claiming that “the average man has a porno movie on a continuous loop going in his brain at all times” and that asexuals should be the most successful people in the world, seeing as they were “freed from the enormous energy it takes an average person – average man – to think about sex all day long” (“Not Attracted to Either Sex?” n.p.). Tucker also balanced the validity of asexuality outside of pathology on whether or not asexuals feel arousal, admitting that asexuality did not sound as merely a hormonal imbalance only after Jay explained that some asexuals could, indeed, become sexually aroused. Other stereotypical questions surfaced in this interview as well, such as the topic of repression, or Tucker urging Jay

to try sex at least once: “How about this. Why don’t you just try it once, and then you’ll know for certain whether you like it or not?” (“Not Attracted to Either Sex?” n.p.). The language chosen for this particular suggestion implies certain negotiation on Tucker’s part, which could be paraphrased as asking Jay to validate his identity by trying sex, even if he has no interest in it, simply to prove that he would not be interested even if he had first-hand experience in what he was missing. When Jay opposed this idea with a question of his own, asking how many times did he need to have sex before his opinion was taken into consideration as legitimate and informed, Tucker replied with “Well, a couple!” and compared sex to goat cheese, which people usually disliked when they were children and said they would never eat it, but after trying it several times, suddenly they started liking goat cheese (“Not Attracted to Either Sex?” n.p.). Here, asexuality was once again likened to a child’s mind, to an immature state that one simply had to grow out of, a state characterized by a lack of agency that had to be overcome with experience. Jay attempted to turn the argument around: “Honestly, did you have to try sex to realize it was something that you wanted to do? Do most fifteen-year-old boys have to try?”. While the show’s host admitted it “wasn’t a hard sell” in his case and thus his personal experience indicated otherwise, he did not relent from attempting to persuade Jay to try sex, “on the principle that everything is worth trying at least once” (“Not Attracted to Either Sex?” n.p.).

The longest discussion on asexuality on television at the time appeared in January 2007, when a whole episode of *The Montel Williams Show* was dedicated to interviews with asexual people as well as Joy Davidson, the sex therapist who presented highly critical and negative views on asexuality on ABC’s *20/20* in March 2006. It is likely that Davidson was invited precisely because of her previous statements against asexuality: Williams had her sit in the audience for roughly thirty minutes before he addressed her, stating that he wanted her to just listen and implying that he wanted her to amend her opinions on asexuality. Davidson then commented that what was disturbing to her was not anyone’s personal experience, but

the level of misinformation being communicated to viewers and thousands of people out there who *are* struggling, who *are* questioning, who *are* confused. [...] yes, there *is* a correlation between asexuality and various physiological conditions. Asperger’s Syndrome, Klinefelter Syndrome, none of which is even mentioned on your website.

(“Asexuality: The Joy of Sex?” n.p.)

Davidson thus labeled increasing the awareness of asexuality as misinformation, regardless of the reasons for struggle, questions and confusion she mentioned as indicators that something could be going on with a person that could be treated by a therapist. She did not even allow for the fact that struggling with one's non-heterosexual identity, questioning one's sexual orientation and being confused by a sexual orientation outside of the well-known spectrum do not necessarily have to be indicative of a psychological, neurological or hormonal problem, but might be the result of trying to consolidate one's non-heterosexual orientation and identity with the rules of a heteronormative society.

Davidson also attacked the asexual community for the lack of research on asexuality, saying she found "nothing scholarly on your website, nothing written by experts, nothing that has a basis in scientific evidence and no one with any qualifications speaking on the subject" ("Asexuality: The Joy of Sex?" n.p.). However, it appears unjust to blame the lack of scientific studies on a community of people who converged merely on the basis of their sexuality and were not responsible for the lack of academic interest in their orientation.

The sex therapist invalidated asexuality based on the existence of conditions that can affect one's libido. However, she mentioned conditions such as Asperger Syndrome or Klinefelter Syndrome, with which it is possible to alter some of the symptoms or resulting interpersonal difficulties, but these conditions are impossible to cure completely, one being a variant of autistic conditions and the other based in genetics. People with diagnosed Asperger's or Klinefelter's might undergo therapy or hormonal treatment without much increase in their libido. They might very well experience a marked increase in libido without experiencing sexual attraction nonetheless. Even if a person with Asperger's or Klinefelter's discovered the asexual community without previously being made aware of their condition, it is difficult to see how it would prevent this person from discovering their sexuality or their disability. Both Williams and Davidson claimed that these people might be prevented from finding "who they are" ("Asexuality: The Joy of Sex?" n.p.) simply because they were accepted and supported by people whose experiences and thoughts about sexuality were similar, regardless of whether or not they shared the same neurological or genetic predispositions. In this respect, asexuality was once again put in the position of something that should only ever be accepted if any and all means and possibilities of making a person sexual have been exhausted. Even with regard to the difficult

relationship between disability and asexuality created by negative perceptions of these groups by the able-bodied and non-asexual society, acceptance in a group of people with similar views does not appear to be undesirable. However, Davidson's claims and the asexual interviewees' reactions point to the difficulties in reconciling disability and asexuality without invalidating and dismissing either of the respective, distinct groups.

MTV's short segment on asexuality in the same year described this orientation as an immature state: a sex therapist, Alex Katehakis, defined it as "very very young developmentally" ("Young and Asexual" n.p.) and rooted in shame about sexuality while growing up. However, Jay and Henry Davidson, asexuals interviewed in the program, only spoke about disinterest in sex, not shame or fear of it. MTV's segment became another one in the list of articles and shows that asked asexuals to validate their identity through the 'Gold Star' asexuality mentioned by Decker (2014): in order to be taken at least slightly more seriously, asexuals such as Jay or Davidson had to prove that they were physically and mentally healthy, socially well-adjusted and completely comfortable and content with their lives. This approach could make the search for an identity more difficult for asexuals who do not fit into all the categories describing a perfectly healthy human being.

Asexuality was also slowly earning the support of gay and lesbian communities at that time. In August 2007, *The Gay and Lesbian Times* of San Diego ran a four-page feature on asexuality which presented the views of several asexuals on questions of identity formation, relationships, intimacy, and the goals of the asexual community in the near future. An article on asexuality was also published in the same month by the adult website *Naughty America*. Jeffery S. Taylor in "Asexuality: Taking the Ass out of Passion" adopted an approach similar to *The Gay and Lesbian Times*, interviewing asexuals rather than commenting on the issue. The author included an interview with a non-asexual woman who became active in the asexual community because of her asexual brother. The woman, only named Carolyn in the article, hinted at a previously invisible topic: the semantics of describing asexuals.

Carolyn says her parents 'seem to be pretty cool with him living that way if it's what he wants.' She admits they often use inaccurate phrases though, like telling people their son 'decided he's asexual.' She notes that, in her opinion anyway, asexuality is an orientation, and that orientations aren't really something you 'decide' upon.

(Taylor n.p.)

The rhetorical devices employed by the parents in this example to suggest that asexuality was a choice are frequent in past articles and discussions of asexuality.

2009 saw the rise of asexual activism with regard to DSM and its definitions of HSDD. ABC News' Dan Childs explained the reasoning in "Asexuals Push for Greater Recognition". Quoting Bogaert and Brotto, the article stated that asexual activists strived to be recognized as members of a sexual minority instead of people with a disorder. The distinction was again made based on the levels of distress an individual experienced, and Bogaert mentioned that asexuals were concerned about asexuality making it to DSM as a disorder of its own. Pepper Schwartz, a sociology professor, was less accepting of asexuality: she maintained that the distinction between asexuality and "insufficient capability for desire or arousal" could be made based on "how the person – or their partner – feels about it" (Childs n.p.). Interestingly, Schwartz here connected a person's identity and sexual orientation to another person's acceptance or understanding of it, regardless of various difficulties that could arise from asking a person's partner to decide that person's sexual orientation. Moreover, Schwartz expressed doubts about whether asexuality should be declassified as a psychological disorder:

Given that I believe our sexuality is a great emotional and physical asset, it is hard for me to think asexuality is appropriate to declassify [...] On the other hand, we certainly do not want to oppress someone who is happily asexual and does not have a deprived partner.

(Childs n.p.)

Once again, the importance was placed not only on the potential asexual's contentment, but also on their partner's. Such an approach would make the situation significantly more difficult for those people who have been asexual without knowing anything about asexuality and thus could have been married and engaging in unwanted sexual intercourse simply due to heteronormative societal pressure, or for asexual people who never had any strong objections to having sex with their partners, but did not feel the attraction or desire themselves, nonetheless. It would seem ridiculous if anyone were to suggest that if a man married a woman while young, and later on realized he was homosexual, his wife should have a say in whether or not he was actually gay or should seek treatment. However, it seemed to be the case with asexuals, in the eyes of some experts. Such an approach would likely serve to exacerbate the pervasive notion of masculinities as tied in to the sexual satisfaction of one's partner, furthering the pressure on asexual men to perform sexually, despite their disinterest or even repulsion in the

activities, simply for fear of not being perceived as “real men” (Kimmel “The Gender of Desire” 140). As illustrated in Chapter 1, such pressures already exist: one of the asexual men interviewed for Przybylo’s article explicitly stated that he only had sex with his wife to please her, and that he wanted things other than sex from the relationship. However, he felt like sex eventually became the most important part of their relationship (Przybylo, “Masculine Doubt” 231).

The *Philadelphia Examiner* chose to explore the possibility of asexuality in March 2009, in “Is Asexuality a New Orientation?” The article listed some of the reasons why it might be difficult for people to accept the idea of asexuality, stating that it was easier to understand same-sex attraction or the existence of transgender people than to accept a complete lack of sexual attraction in a person. Asexuals were called an “androgynous” group, which ties in with the idea that sexuality is closely related to how people’s gender is perceived as well – the reason why asexual people express worries over being seen as not masculine or feminine enough without subscribing to the traditional heteronormative roles.

Other articles of the same year were somewhat more generous to asexuality. *SFGate.com*, a news website based in San Francisco, offered an article by Demian Bulwa, “Asexuals Leave the Closet, Find Community” in August 2009. Bulwa quoted Bogaert and Jay, stating that asexuality raised questions about the nature of love and that asexuals wanted respect as opposed to creating new civil rights, and admitted that “the birth of the asexual movement has been as tricky as the personal stories” (n.p.). One of the reasons could be that asexuals “lack the cultural markers claimed by the gay community – styles of dress, for instance, or bars in which to gather” (Bulwa n.p.). The author also hinted at the position of Jay as an ideal spokesman of asexuality due to his being a Gold Star Asexual: “young, charismatic and good-looking, [...] a man [...] who could have sex if he wanted to” (n.p.). He then mentioned the New Zealand soap opera *Shortland Street* (TV2, 1992-present), which at the time featured an asexual character. This created some outcry against the storyline, suggesting that the male character was originally supposed to be gay, which was later changed due to concerns of the network about parents having “unnecessary difficulties” in explaining homosexuality to their children (“Gay Express: Double Standards” n.p.). The short article in question asked: “What kind of a compromise is it to make his character completely uninterested in sex with anyone as opposed to finding love with another man?” (“Gay Express: Double Standards” n.p.). While the outrage over the scrapping of the original storyline is

understandable, it also creates questions as to whether or not an asexual character would have been accepted, had he not been supposed to be gay previously. The representation of gay and lesbian characters left something to be desired in 2009, but asexuals were – and continue to be – sorely underrepresented. Despite that fact, this article expressed the opinion that an asexual character was merely an unsatisfactory compromise instead of a valuable addition to the small spectrum of non-heterosexual characters on prime time television. The network’s reasons for discarding the gay storyline might be questionable. Nevertheless, turning even briefly to same-sex relationships in search of one’s identity is an experience shared by many asexuals, and thus it does not appear far-fetched to see this character hint at the possibility of being homosexual before discovering asexuality as an option.

The webpage of the *Philadelphia Examiner* lists a large number of articles related to asexuality, in no small part thanks to the efforts of Lara Nicole Landis, an asexual journalist writing under the title ‘Philadelphia Asexual Examiner.’ Since 2010, Landis has written several dozen articles on asexual issues, such as the difficult relationship between sex therapists, who might see asexuality as an attack on the necessity of their profession, and asexuals, who often perceive sex therapists as hostile towards their orientation (“AVEN and Joy Davidson”) or myths surrounding asexuality, e.g. asexuals being always female, anti-sex, and living cleanly, none of which is true (“All Aces Are Female”, “Anti-sex”, “Straightedge”). The myth about asexuals being predominantly female, i.e. of asexuality being much more likely found in females, is particularly intriguing when considering the fact that David Jay, the most prominent member and *de facto* founder of the asexual community is male, as well as most asexual characters in television fiction at that time (as well as nowadays). Such a misconception urges to question why is it so: the connection of overt sexuality and masculine identities, as well as stereotypical ideas of what being male means, could be the reason why it is easier for people to imagine female asexuals. On the other hand, these stereotypes likely contribute to the difficulties men can have when coming to an asexual identity as well as when coming out to their friends and family as asexual (Przybylo “Masculine Doubt” n.p.).

Landis also addressed the harmful statements of so-called *ex-asexuals* and their narratives, which were quickly revealed as the stories of repression and refusal to acknowledge one’s sexuality. The example of such articles Landis used was “The Lives of Otters: I, Ex-Asexual (Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bottom)”

posted in February 2010 on *TheNewGay.net* website, in which the author neatly summarized the most prominent misconceptions about asexuality by proclaiming he had once partaken in “an immature, selfish, and destructive lifestyle [...] I was an asexual. I was entirely comfortable with it, so far had I strayed. And by the redeeming grace that is the infinite erotic generosity of the DC gay scene, I was made whole” (“The Lives of Otters” n.p.). The male author, listed only as the Managing Editor, went on to describe how he experienced a sudden drop in his sexual desire and attraction to others, stopped masturbating and even considered priesthood. A simple look at how most asexuals describe their lives implies that this man’s story does not quite line up with the experiences of asexuals; however, the Managing Editor was quick to dismiss asexuality in general due to his own personal account and to his newfound sexual desire.

Rather than being one more difference to be celebrated in the queer patchwork, asexuality as I’ve lived it strikes me as an immature and incomplete way to get on in the world, hardly worthy of recognition and encouragement. The deep and monkish sense of contentment I felt during my sexless year came at the cost of ignoring a whole range of feelings and body parts, both mine and (more importantly) other people’s. Asexuality meant for me a cowardly denial of the sometimes terrifying, always electrifying flux that is sexuality, an unconscious retreat to the suffocating but comfortable predictability of childhood and a turning away from the kinds of pleasure and pain, affection and heartbreak, spiritual topping and bottoming that make lives like ours worth living. I’m aware that there are people who identify this way and have done so for much longer than I – I sympathize with them and at the same time condemn their lack of courage, the same fear of the unknown and uneasiness with sensuality that stole from me what could have been one of the best years of my life.

(“The Lives of Otters” n.p.)

Perhaps the most reprehensible thing about this article was that asexuality was labeled as selfish: the author even explicitly stated that he considered the emotional and sexual needs of others more important than his own. Such a statement plays into the misconception that in a way, people owe sex to their partners or to any other people interested in having sex with them; a stereotype damaging not only for asexuals, but also for anybody whose partners have a different level of sexual desire, or simply for individuals who might want to turn down unwanted sexual advances of others. The author also expressed aggressive disbelief towards asexuality as an orientation and towards the possibility of asexuals leading fulfilling and complete lives without sexual attraction or activity, an approach that appears more than slightly unfair considering that the author seemingly failed to do his research on asexuality, or at the very least failed to

understand the definition of it, even if he mentioned reading some of the posts on AVEN. In this way, asexuality was yet again pushed into the role of an easy, cowardly way out of the trouble brought on by romantic and sexual relationships, and presented as a simple lack of courage to face one's true desires. While that might very well be true for the Editor, this article managed to enhance the stereotypes that could be harmful to people who do not experience the sudden sort of sexual epiphany the Editor himself has. Notably, since the article was written by a male author, it would seem that his rejection of asexuality as impossible, odd and unhealthy supports the assumption that homophobia as a stepping stone towards masculine identity is indeed related not only to homosexuality, but to asexuality as well: the Editor claims that asexuality is cowardly and unadventurous, and thus cannot be accepted as a part of a man's self constructed on principles such as bravery and adventurousness.

With the generalized sensationalist coverage of asexuality on television that we have seen was the norm, asexuals lacked detailed, informed visual representation until 2011, when director Angela Tucker released the 75-minute independent documentary *(A)sexual*. Filmed over the course of three years, the documentary explored the lives of asexuals as well as non-asexual people's opinions on this orientation. When non-asexuals were asked what came to their mind first upon hearing the word "asexuality", the replies were varied, but none too positive:

Moss. [...] Tadpoles. [...] No idea. [...] Equal parts feminine and masculine, with no sexualness about it. [...] Kind of an insult. [...] Nerdy guy who just sits in the corner and doesn't try to hit on any girls. [...] Not sure what it is or if it even exists, or in which species. [...] Preparing yourself to do something [...] There's no such thing as asexual. [...] A reaction to our crazy super-population growth [...] Or frogs changing sexes type of thing.

(Tucker n.p.)

Not only was asexuality apparently perceived as nonexistent, inhuman, or an insult, it was also once again strongly linked to a person's perceived gender, much like in the 2009 *Philadelphia Examiner* article. Other ideas about asexuality mostly dealt with the usage of the term to describe someone who just ended a relationship and did not want to participate in any sexual activity. One of the non-asexual women even stated that she proclaimed herself asexual on such occasions, furthering the misunderstandings surrounding the asexual identity, especially considering the fact that the interviewed non-asexuals unanimously stated they did not know anyone who was asexual. Men seemed to react more strongly to the idea of asexuality: while most of the non-asexual

people were answering questions about asexuality alone, there were two men who answered together. They were the most adamant to deny that asexuality existed: most women, or even men who answered alone, seemed ambivalent on the idea, claiming that they were not certain whether it existed or not, or what it was, but these two men claimed that there was no such thing as asexual, and one of them even went on to say that one date with him would change someone's asexuality. This suggests the performance of masculinity in front of other men, which was discussed in the previous chapter: in front of another man, one is strongly compelled to deny the very existence of asexuality and to immediately assert one's own masculinity through sexual prowess, by suggesting that he could, so to speak, cure asexuality in others. Yet, it is impossible to say how these two men would have responded, had they been asked to answer separately, and whether or not their views would have been expressed differently.

Tucker made an important choice in interviewing not only the usual asexual spokespeople, such as David Jay or Julie Decker, but also older asexuals, whose experience was different from that of people in their twenties or early thirties, making them a valuable and important addition to the discussion of asexuality. Researchers such as Anthony Bogaert, Lori Brotto or Cynthia Graham explained their findings and opinions. Carol Queen, a sociologist and sexologist, was invited to speak, and unlike most other sexologists asked about asexuality in the past, she expressed the idea that “shrinks have been defining us for 150-years-ish, and before that, the Bible people. So it's important: we get to define ourselves” (Tucker n.p.). She also stated that before meeting Jay, she never heard the word ‘asexual’ as a term signifying a sexual orientation, and explained that the misunderstanding between non-asexual and asexual people might go both ways: while asexuals might have trouble understanding the society's obsession with sex, non-asexual people have equal trouble accepting that asexuality could be perceived as a part of the sexuality spectrum.

The documentary further followed Jay and a group of AVEN members attending a LGBTQ+ Pride march in an attempt to spread awareness with signs, shirts, and information flyers about asexuality. The asexuals attending the Pride march were also interviewed for the documentary, and one young male asexual expressed his frustrations about his friends who react to his claims of asexuality with dismissal, telling him he is gay instead. The reactions seen in the crowd of the Pride March or among non-asexual participants were mostly wary or downright negative, hinting that asexuals were mistaken for a religious group promoting celibacy, or an anti-sex movement. One of the

women in the pride march looked at the flyer and handed it back, saying “You’re polluting my mind! I totally respect you, though – just give us twenty feet, okay?” (Tucker n.p.). Even though the woman was laughing while speaking, the concept of asexuality being somehow contagious is disturbingly reminiscent of an attitude towards homosexual people in the not-so-distant past, and even more disturbing when one considers the fact that the very people who have faced such prejudice only decades, if not years, previously would behave this way towards another marginalized group.

A portion of the documentary followed Jay’s daily life and his close relationships. He stated that he was in a close platonic partnership with several people, considering his relationships in non-traditional terms. While giving a talk to a student group, Jay used a diagram to portray how people could have an emotionally and intimately fulfilling existence once they stop treating sex as the center and the foundation of the single most important relationship in their lives, and focus more on how each individual relationship has its own specific importance and provides for different needs of a person. Towards the end of the documentary, the problematics of relationships was expanded upon and while there was hope for progress in terms of visibility and acceptance of asexuality, it was made clear that asexuals still lacked physical spaces to meet others like themselves.

After the presentation of *(A)Sexual* at the 2011 Fringe! Film Festival in London, asexuality briefly gained more coverage in media. Tucker was also invited to a *Huffington Post Live* talk on asexuality in November 2012, together with Jay, CJ Chasin, and Maddox, an LGBT activist. Tucker stated that her interest in asexuality was sparked by an article about David Jay, and that she realized that none of her friends and acquaintances knew anything about asexuality, but their reactions to – and against – the very idea of asexuality were still particularly strong, which thus became a fascinating topic for her. Tucker also wanted to explore what non-asexual people could learn from the way asexual people maintained relationships, considering that in her experience, some non-asexual people tended to exaggerate the importance of sex in their lives due to societal pressure and thus could possibly find different meaning in relationships through the experiences of asexuals (“Love without Sex” n.p.). The host of the segment seemed genuinely curious and very enthusiastic and inclusive toward the ideas expressed by the guests. The fact that no sexologists or therapists were asked to join the talk is noteworthy, considering that in previous instances of television coverage on asexuality, at least one of such experts would be present. That a segment on asexuality

could move past the medicalization to the extent of not including health experts in the talk and instead focus on the asexual experiences as described by asexual people could be considered a major, if often overlooked, step forward in the direction of asexual visibility and awareness.

FOX News seemingly regressed from a mildly accepting stance in the previous years and went back to ridicule and disbelief in an August 2012 episode of their satirical late-night show *Red Eye*, in a segment titled “Book Suggests Asexuals Should Be Recognized as Orientation”. In reaction to Bogaert’s book *Understanding Asexuality*, the show hosted several people talking about their opinions on this new orientation. One of them, a woman called Brooke, said that asexuality has been around for a long time, and “it’s called being a woman every three and a half weeks. It’s a wonderful excuse out of obligation, come on” (“Book Suggests” n.p.). Partnered sex was apparently perceived as an obligation by Brooke, something one would need a valid excuse to avoid. Brooke then continued to say that she felt sorry for men who were classified as asexual simply because they did not objectify women, and that the claims of asexuality were based on men who did not want to have sex ten times a day. While grossly exaggerating the reported levels of attraction or desire in asexual people, Brooke also claimed that asexuals did not exist and were simply “absolutely normal in this uber-sexualized society so we had to invent this asexuality” (“Book Suggests” n.p.). It is interesting to note Brooke’s generalizations: *all* women were asexual at some points of their lives or menstrual cycles, while at the same time, *no* men were completely asexual. Men were either overly sexual if they did want to have sex ten times a day, or normal when they wanted to have sex less than this extremely exaggerated amount. Brooke’s argument seemed rather close-minded and misinformed, especially considering the notable efforts of the asexual community not to classify any person. The leading voices in the asexual community have spoken in favor of allowing people to explore the options and, if applicable, use the appropriate labels for themselves. Moreover, simplifying the lack of sexual attraction towards people as “not objectifying women” (“Book Suggests” n.p.) is problematic: an asexual person can still commit acts of misogyny, intentional or not (as we will see below with the analyzed characters), and a hypersexual person thinking about sex numerous times a day does not necessarily have to be objectifying women in the process.

One of the men on *Red Eye* brought up the argument of too many letters under the LGBT+ umbrella. Another one, a comedian by the name Dan Soder, asked rather

sarcastically what asexuals even wanted when they called for more representation: “just, like, the most boring beer commercial ever? Just like, a guy goes like ‘Beer!’ That’s it. No chicks in bikinis” (“Book Suggests” n.p.). Soder, no doubt unwittingly, illustrated the problem of hypersexualized advertising and media: a commercial would be seen as boring if it did not include half-naked women and instead, focused on the actual product it was advertising. While more groups, if not all people, would benefit from fighting sexism in media, by pushing this issue into the realm of asexual representation, Soder trivialized both the necessity for representation of asexual people in the media and the validity of the fight against misogyny and sexism at large. It is interesting that such a claim would occur so shortly after Brooke’s claims about objectification: it would appear that objectifying women was, after all, perceived as healthy and normal. Bill Schulz, another man speaking on the show, became rather agitated and exasperated when asked about possible discrimination asexuals might face. Schulz asked: “Can we, after a while, just stop recognizing things? Like, if it’s that small part of population, do I have to recognize you?” (“Book Suggests” n.p.). The research on the exact percentage of asexuals in the general world population has not been conclusive and some studies point to a far higher number. Still, even one percent would constitute millions of people only in the United States. That should be a reasonable enough basis for the call for recognition, but Schulz’ claims illustrated the petulant standpoint of majority groups towards any minority they perceive as threatening towards the deep-rooted belief that minorities should adopt a “you exist, move on” (“Book Suggests” n.p.) stance instead of bringing discrimination, underrepresentation and their very existence to light. The segment ended on a worrisome note, with the host stating, albeit jokingly, that he did not trust asexuals because they did not want sex, and another man on the show agreeing readily with that. This illustrates how asexual people in general might be treated by their non-asexual acquaintances or colleagues, but also how asexual men might be treated by their male friends – with disbelief, denial, and even blatant mistrust or dislike. The host might have intended the mistrust comment as a light-hearted joke, but in light of MacInnis and Hodson’s findings about intergroup bias against asexuals described in earlier chapters, remarks such as these cannot in good conscience be treated as amusing. It is alarming that while in 2012, people were already recognizing the fact that satirizing a specific group of people by targeting race, religion or sexual orientation might not be the way to go on national television, asexuals still earned such remarks without any major repercussions for the host.

The *Huffington Post* discussed their six-part feature on asexuality from June 2013 on the *Huffington Post Live* show at the time of its publication, in a similarly open-minded and accepting manner. The show's host Ricky Camilleri gestured air quotes while stating that the asexual community was calling themselves *ace* and immediately followed by stating: "that was not a condescending quote" ("Asexuals Step Out of the Closet" n.p.), hinting that asexuals were recognized as a valid group who had to face discrimination at certain times. At a later point during the show, Camilleri also stated that he did not want to trivialize anything when asking about people who might find it hard to understand that someone did not have any sexual feelings. This approach indicates that he went out of his way to guarantee that he did not offend asexual people, however unintentionally. The show featured Dominique Mosbergen – the author of the original six articles, David Jay – the founder of AVEN, Micah R. – a transgender and asexual advocate, Julie Decker – the author of *Invisible Orientation*, and Lori Brotto – a Canadian researcher and psychologist and an author of several studies on asexuality. Mosbergen spoke about her inspiration for the article and stated that she considered such a broad topic meaningful and important because there was a lot of ignorance in the public, and they wanted to "start a discussion [and] start questioning [...] in a hyper-sexualized society, why are we so quick to assume that to be human means to be sexual" ("Asexuals Step Out of the Closet" n.p.). Brotto made an important point about why asexuality was treated as a disorder when she explained that clinicians were used to people coming to them with sudden very low desire levels, and that clinicians were used to treating these people and attempt to help them get better. For that reason, some medical professionals might find it difficult to accept that some people would not be bothered by their life-long lack of sexual attraction, and that it was not necessarily a problem.

Cosmopolitan, one of the most popular lifestyle magazines, published an article on asexuality on their website in 2014. Rachel Hills interviewed two anonymous asexual women about their experiences, named only Woman A and Woman B. One of them spoke about the difficulties of finding positive role models in the media while growing up: not only was it difficult to find any characters who might be read as asexual, but those characters were usually depicted in a rather negative light, and none of the few positive, potentially asexual role models were female:

Most characters weren't human (think robots, aliens, and monsters), and usually their real or perceived asexuality was something to be cured or overcome. It also wasn't something you saw associated with anyone coded as a woman, unless of course you needed someone to thaw her frigid heart. Or shank her for being a monster. The only positive, tenuous portrayal I really knew growing up was Sherlock Holmes, who is still often compared to a machine.

(Hills n.p.)

It worth noting that it was hard to find any women associated with asexuality on television shows, despite the fact that most of the statistics in the asexual community have shown that more women than men currently identify as asexual. This in itself poses questions about the perception of women's agency when establishing sexual relationships, reminiscent of how they are perceived as something to be conquered instead of human beings capable of communicating and understanding their own feelings and needs. Furthermore, representation of asexual characters as alien-like or robot-like relates to the representation of both female *and* male asexuals in contemporary television fiction.

On the topic of representation, the other interviewee, Woman A, spoke about how she decided not to give time to films, books or shows that did not recognize her: however, with the severe underrepresentation of asexual characters, one can only imagine how limited her options would be in terms of media consumption. Woman B brought up another point as to why representation matters:

because asexuality isn't well known, I sometimes worry I'll do something 'wrong' and discredit the cause or something. It's pretty silly and doesn't make a lot of sense when I think about it, but I still tend to veer between wanting to be some kind of 'model ace,' or throwing my hands up in the air to say 'I am what I am!' I've gotten better since high school and even college, but I still have some stuff to unpack mentally about that.

(Hills n.p.)

The lack of representation in the media thus becomes a heavy burden for asexual people, who need to become their own representative samples and are under constant pressure to perform their asexuality in a way that would not cast any negative light on the community and orientation as a whole. This might lead to asexuals potentially finding the label more troublesome than helpful, even if they would have adopted the term for themselves under other circumstances.

In 2015, several articles made a point to differentiate between the varieties of the asexual spectrum. Cara Liebowitz's February article on *EverydayFeminism.com*, "Let

Them Eat Cake: On Being Demisexual”, explained demisexuality from her personal experience and once again highlighted the importance of awareness and visibility work by speaking about the times when she did not know there was a difference between sexual and romantic attraction, assumed that she would eventually want to have sex with someone, and felt confusion when her friends talked about being sexually frustrated. A similar point about the likely fluidity of identities on the asexual spectrum was made by Kat McGowan on *Wired.com* in her February 2015 article, “Young, Attractive, and Totally Not into Having Sex”. Three college students she interviewed identified as aromantic asexual, heteroromantic demisexual, and panromantic gray-asexual, with more demisexuals mentioned as well. McGowan pointed out that asexuals were supposedly not too preoccupied with finding one label to hold on to without any possibility of change in the future: another student who was interviewed stated that “every single asexual I’ve met embraces fluidity – I might be gray or asexual or demisexual” (McGowan n.p.). *AfterEllen.com* talked favorably about the experiences of several asexual lesbians in April 2015 (Wilson n.p.). The June edition of *USA Today* reported on asexuality being increasingly a part of pride month information and activities. In July, *NY Times*’ Kim Kaletsky described the experience of starting to identify as asexual and have one’s therapist react with disbelief and dismissal to the point where Kaletsky had to search for acceptance in her school’s LGBT+ support group. Around the same time, *EverydayFeminism.com* brought an article addressing the issues of mental healthcare and asexuality, “Why We Need Mental Healthcare without Asexual Erasure – And How to Get There”. Kirstin Kelley expanded on the dismissal of asexuality among medical professionals and the trouble it might cause for asexual people who have to struggle with mental health issues and thus could benefit from seeing a therapist. Kelley’s own therapist dismissed her asexuality as a mere symptom of her depression, despite Kelley’s claims that she did feel her asexuality as an identity, not a part of her mental health problems. Kelley suggested that therapists should focus not only on the facts of a lack of sexual attraction or desire, but also on the way the patient spoke about their unique experience: whether the patient was excited about discovering a new possibility, or expressed distress and a wish to change their level of interest in sex. Towards the end of the article, Kelley advised asexual people to seek support in an asexual community, learn about asexuality for easier recognition of a therapist’s wrongful assertions, and possibly look for a therapist known for being open towards LGBT+ people and topics. While the article had a female author, it definitely

holds relevance for the discussions on masculinities: seeing as men are often indirectly encouraged to ignore sickness or illness in order to attain a sense of self-reliance and not show weakness (Reeser 11-12), it can be assumed that this ignorance of one's problems extends past the physical body into the area of mental health issues. A male asexual coming to see a therapist might be equally discouraged from seeking further help if his sexuality is invalidated or ridiculed by the medical professional.

Despite greater coverage and increasing diversity of asexual topics, some therapists and journalists still refused to perceive asexuality as a healthy orientation in 2015. Ruth Westheimer, a sex therapist, writer and media personality better known as Dr. Ruth, generated some outcry against her statement on Twitter in which she expressed the opinion that the often-cited number of 1% of population was 1% too much and that people should be glad it was so low (@AskDrRuth). Dr. Ruth previously garnered some negative responses from the asexual community when she replied to a woman writing to her advice column in *Chicago Tribune* by stating that if one was capable of an orgasm, it was impossible to be asexual. Rachel Kramer Bussel on *Salon.com* reported on the reactions of the asexual community, as well as some more accepting therapists, to the issue of Dr. Ruth's Twitter post. It was explained that while her statement was unfortunate, it was also understandable: Dr. Ruth, in her late eighties, grew up in a world which celebrated sexual liberation and freedom, thus it could be difficult for her to accept the idea of asexuality.

However, not all cases of ignorance and hostility towards the asexual community can be ascribed to age and different sets of values while growing up. Ted Rall, a columnist and caricaturist born in 1963, expressed views much worse than those of Dr. Ruth in an article from October 2015, published on *aNewDomain.net*. The website focuses on technology and thus is likely not the best environment for enlightened and open-minded discussions of human sexualities. Rall's "American and Sexless: And This Is a Good Thing?" was published in the "Commentary and Satire" section, and viciously attacked asexuality, perceived as a "strange new cultural meme" (Rall n.p.). The author seemed to believe that the existence of asexuality and the discussion on intimacy not necessarily achieved solely through sexual intercourse somehow made the society as a whole "more prudish" (n.p.). He stated that talking about asexuality as a good thing "discourages those of us who like sex from having any, or keeping silent about it when we do" (n.p.), a claim that raised false alarm about the state of sex in the society despite its ridiculousness considering the ratio of sex advice

and sex-oriented material in the media. Rall must have been aware of how impossible his worries sounded, because he implored the reader “Do not doubt what I am saying” (n.p.), doubt being the attitude any rational and well-informed person would take in regard to claims of people being discouraged from having sex by the very existence of asexuals. He then went on to couple asexuality with articles describing negative sexual experiences, seemingly without understanding that having solely positive accounts of sexuality in no way helped people in solving the various problems and issues arising from being sexually active. In blaming asexuality for the rising visibility and awareness of the problems that could arise in one’s sex life, Rall managed to sound rather petty and bitter, while his article read like an outraged cry of a majority which fights against information and awareness of minorities, claiming that life was much better when minorities stayed under the radar and no negative accounts of the majority’s life were to be found.

Furthermore, Rall put sex on a pedestal, expressing the view that “life without zest is no life at all. There is no zest without sex. The new sexlessness is a plague masquerading as a movement” (n.p.), illustrating the obsession of the society with sex as the sole center of human (and particularly male) experience. It seems interesting that the author likened asexuality, a small sexual minority and still more or less invisible to the majority society, to a mass infection. Such a simile begs the question what the outcome of such a plague would be. While Rall seemed to believe the far-fetched idea that 1% of population could somehow deter the other 99% from having sex, it is rather disheartening to see a person witness the discussion about various levels and types of intimacy, a debate non-asexuals could benefit from as well without abandoning sex, and only take this narrative as a threat to sex at large. Rall also called for more articles about sex that did not offer anything in terms of education or problem-solving, stating it would be refreshing to see “a piece about how awesome sex is” (n.p.), because according to the author, nobody would ever know that if they only read the news. While it could be difficult to take seriously an article that clamored for the decrease of information about sex, the way Rall treated the question of asexuality with not only dismissal but open distaste and rage could be indicative of the way asexual men are perceived and treated by non-asexual men. Furthermore, his words could be harmful to the perception of asexuals by people who have not come across any other accounts of asexuality, or instill unfounded fear of asexuality in the readers’ minds.

Another documentary on asexuality appeared on YouTube in October 2015, created by Sam Broadley. In an interview for the *This Is Local London* website, Broadley claimed that his interest was sparked when he realized he knew next to nothing about asexuality and felt that if one percent of the population was asexual, he should probably know these things: “If 1 in every 100 people do in fact identify as asexual, then why had I never heard of it? Was it because as a heterosexual, cis-gendered, straight man sex is very easy?” (“An Exclusive Interview with Sam Broadley” n.p.). The documentary featured several asexual people, with a lot of focus on male asexual activists and researchers. One of the interviewees pointed out the imbalance in representation of asexuals on television: “A lot of the asexual characters you might get on TV are [...] autistic-presenting straight white boys” (Broadley n.p.). The statement was followed by footage of the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC’s) *Sherlock* (2010-present) and *Doctor Who* (1963-present), as well as the ninth episode of the eighth season of *House, MD* (FOX, 2004-2012). The episode is infamous in the asexual community, because House repeatedly claims that he can find a medical reason for someone being asexual, and that the only people who do not want to have sex are sick, dead, or lying. George Norman, one of the asexuals interviewed for Broadley’s documentary and the first openly asexual election candidate in the UK, mentioned that this episode of *House, MD* was originally written by someone who identifies as asexual and was meant to have a positive ending, where House could not find any medical reason or a cure. However, “this was deemed inappropriate for the plot” (Broadley n.p.) and changed into the version where House does find a cure for the man in the asexual couple, and the woman is revealed as having lied about her asexuality for the sake of her husband. The perception of male sexuality in this episode again points to the assumption that a man can only be “sick, dead, or lying” if he claims to be asexual, just as House has predicted. Furthermore, the medical solution in the episode is linked solely to low levels of libido and House claims that the man’s sex drive will grow after his tumor is removed, completely dismissing the possibility of the man’s sex drive not connected to sexual attraction, i.e. that the man might remain asexual even if his sex drive does grow after the treatment. This representation of asexuals by “autistic-presenting straight white boys” can also be found in the American media: *The Big Bang Theory*’s Sheldon Cooper fits the description perfectly, and to some extent, so does Dexter Morgan from *Dexter*. These characters are, just as the documentary stated, white, male, without homoerotic feelings or overly feminine behavior that could shift

the perception of them towards the “not straight” category, and their overall behavior can be described as reminiscent of autism. This could suggest that asexual orientation, or even asexual behavior, is deemed controversial enough that only the characters with the otherwise strongest position on television could hint at being asexual: white straight male characters.

All of these accounts of asexuality in the media serve to illustrate the state of the question as perceived by the general public through newspapers, magazines and television talk shows. There has been a visible increase in asexuality awareness throughout the past decade. More journalists are taking the time to find information about asexuality before writing their articles, and people are beginning to write their own accounts of their life on the asexual spectrum for various websites and magazines. Nonetheless, the stigma associated with asexuality as impossible, inhuman and unhealthy has not completely disappeared. Despite the tentative inclusion of asexuality among the LGBT+ groups, asexuality still garners a lot of negative attention and the ones defending the group against harmful and incorrect information are mostly asexual themselves. However, talk shows, interviews and magazine articles are not the only types of media influencing public opinion. Popular television series reach large audiences and thus can steer the attitudes of their target audiences in a specific direction, be it positive or negative. For this reason, it seems appropriate to look at the way asexual characters are portrayed in fictional shows which have the potential to influence the negotiation of an asexual person’s identity. Therefore, the following chapters will analyze the portrayal of male asexual characters in contemporary popular TV fiction production in order to explore how asexuality and masculinity intersect and collide in the process of the discovery and negotiation of one’s identity.

CHAPTER 4

THE BIG BANG THEORY

When talking about asexual characters on television, the American situation comedy show *The Big Bang Theory* (*TBBT*) is one of the most widely mentioned in online asexual spaces. The show was created for the CBS network by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, who also act as executive producers. Lorre has created several successful sitcoms, such as *Dharma & Greg* (ABC, 1997-2002) or *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003-2015), and served as an executive producer for *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-97) and *Mike & Molly* (CBS, 2010-2016). Bill Prady has also worked on *Dharma & Greg*, as well as *Married... with Children* (FOX, 1987-97), *Star Trek: Voyager* (The United Paramount Network (UPN), 1995-2001) or *Gilmore Girls* (The Warner Bros., 2000-07). Currently in its 11th season, the sitcom started airing on September 24th, 2007. One month later, the network ordered a full season, with the rating of 3.4/8 for adults age 18-49 for the first four episodes, which translated into an average viewership of 8.58 million. The first season received mixed reviews and only ranked 68th in the 2007-08 television show ratings, with 25 episodes, an average of 8.31 million viewers and an average rating of 2.9. However, its popularity grew steadily – seasons 6, 7 and 8 attracted an average of 19 million viewers and consistently rated in the top 5 programs, at times surpassed only by Sunday night football (Patten n.p.), which makes this sitcom an important and potentially influential part of contemporary popular culture. In addition, statistics from 2010 indicate that the audience of *TBBT* is evenly distributed between men and women, with roughly 45% men comprising the audience of adults age 18-49 (“Ladies Night” n.p.). In comparison, among the 63 broadcast primetime shows on the list, only six had more male than female viewers and three had an even ratio of male to female audiences. In this regard, *TBBT* becomes an important source for analysis when discussing the creation of masculine identities based on role models presented in television fiction.

Because of its rising success, *TBBT* is probably the most noteworthy of examples of asexual characters on contemporary US television. The premise of the sitcom is simple: an attractive wannabe-actress, Penny (Kaley Cuoco), moves across the hall from two socially inept scientists, Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki) and Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons), with the regular appearance of their two friends, Rajesh Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar) and Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg). But while *TBBT*

certainly pays attention to the science aspect and employs experts to create plausible dialogues, the appeal of the show indubitably lies in its various and plentiful references to the popular – and so-called *geek culture*. As mentioned in section 2.2, being considered a geek has become the proving ground for many young men in the 21st century. Geeks establish their masculinities through competition which often hinges on knowledge about a specific subject instead of physical attributes. The male characters of *TBBT* illustrate this struggle in nearly every episode. From the very beginning, all four male protagonists are established as geeks in more than one sense: they are shown to have deep appreciation, even obsession, for science-fiction and fantasy works, comic books and video games, but they are also scientists employed by a prestigious university. Sheldon works as a theoretical physicist, Leonard is an experimental physicist, Rajesh is an astrophysicist, and Howard is an engineer. Throughout the show, their status as geeks is frequently explored not only through their interests and hobbies, but also through establishing them as members of the scientific community: Sheldon in particular is recurrently heard flaunting not only his superior knowledge about comic books or television shows, but also mocking other men's scientific achievements in order to build himself up as better. These instances will be further explored throughout this chapter in relation to Sheldon's masculinity as well as his asexuality.

Regarding asexuality, the show established Sheldon Cooper as asexual very early on, even though there has been no official statement concerning his sexual orientation and he is never explicitly labeled asexual on the show. However, many people knowledgeable about the existence of asexuality as well as many members of the asexual community were hopeful for representation in Sheldon's character within the first few episodes of the show. In the pilot, it is immediately apparent that while Leonard is curious about their new attractive neighbor, Penny, Sheldon shows no interest in establishing even basic social ties with her: when Leonard asks if they should invite her for lunch, Sheldon wants to watch *Battlestar Galactica* instead (Lorre and Prady, 2007, 1.1⁸). He seems to understand sexual attraction on a theoretical level, seeing as he comments that Penny is not going to have sex with Leonard, or that they are stuck doing her chores because Leonard is thinking with his penis (1.1). However, his disinterest in any sexual or romantic relationship with Penny is quite clear.

⁸For the sake of clarity and to avoid unnecessary repetition, further references to the show include only the number of the season and the episode.

Furthermore, neither Leonard nor their two friends, Rajesh and Howard, even hint that Sheldon could possibly be interested in Penny, suggesting that his asexuality is wordlessly accepted as a fact.

In episode 5, Sheldon is shown to be uncomfortable when Leonard brings a woman to their shared apartment. He even spends the night on the living room sofa instead of sleeping in his own bedroom. It is possible that Sheldon feels uncomfortable overhearing the sounds that Leonard and his female companion could be making, or that he is simply uneasy in close proximity to a sexual situation (1.5). The eighth episode shows Sheldon talking to a woman without much difficulty: accidentally, he ends up going on what others presume to be a date with the woman originally supposed to enter into an arranged marriage bond with Rajesh. However, when Sheldon returns home and his friends ask him if he will see her again, he seems confused and says that he already has a dentist – the woman in question is an odontologist, and even if they had a pleasant evening, Sheldon sees no reason to see her again except her profession (1.8). He is thus established as having no interest in romantic relationships and disinterest bordering on repulsion regarding sex: several episodes later, he explicitly states that the need for human contact is, in his opinion, “inexplicable” and that “social relationships will continue to baffle and repulse [him]” (1.12).

However, the main selling point for Sheldon’s asexuality, and the most often quoted in debates on his issue, is the scene from the sixth episode of season 2, where Penny asks Leonard, Raj and Howard about Sheldon’s sexual preference:

Penny: I know it’s none of my business, but... what’s Sheldon’s deal?
Leonard: What do you mean, deal?
Penny: You know, like, what’s his deal? Is it girls, guys, sock puppets?
Leonard: Honestly, we’ve been operating under the assumption that he has no deal.
Penny: Oh come *on*. *Everybody* has a deal.
Howard: Not Sheldon.

(2.6)

The men then go on to make fun of Sheldon by suggesting that he would reproduce like a plant or like an alien. Harmful stereotypes aside, it is significant to note that while we have seen in previous chapters that a man without overt sexual interest in women is often assumed to be gay, Sheldon’s friends instead assume that he “has no deal”, i.e. is asexual, even without using that specific term to describe him. However, Leonard, Raj and Howard have previously witnessed Sheldon’s lack of interest in either sex, which

makes their assumption rather logical: in the same episode, he was shown to be completely oblivious to romantic advances from both women and men. In the next episode, Sheldon's disinterest in women as sexual objects is made clear again when Penny comes over to their apartment to watch a supermodel show. Leonard, Howard and Raj immediately divert their attention from the game they have been playing to the screen, but Sheldon seems completely unaffected and ignores the display of attractive women without a second glance in the television's direction (7.2).

This chapter will further focus on the possibilities for the creation of asexual masculinities, as shown in seasons 1-10 of *TBBT* through the character of Sheldon Cooper. Masculinities will be discussed with regard to the four basic rules of traditional masculinity, as mentioned by Kimmel and explored in the debates on masculinity in section 2.2. It will take into consideration the asexual masculinities present in *TBBT* and explore how asexuality factors into the creation of masculine identities in a male asexual character, Sheldon Cooper. The analysis of the show serves to illustrate how asexual and masculine identities potentially interact, and whether they complement or negate each other.

4.1 'No Sissy Stuff'

Out of the four basic rules of masculinity, as used by Kimmel in *The History of Men*, the first one builds on the principle of men constantly having to strive for a marked difference from women and from anything feminine. Sheldon appears to fulfil this obligation in many instances, and one of the most pronounced ways of doing this is by expressing misogynistic attitudes and ideas. The roots of his misogyny could potentially be traced back to his upbringing in East Texas. His mother, Mary Cooper (Laurie Metcalf) is shown to be very religious, with strong standards about how a woman should and should not behave. She talks about her other son's girlfriend as "that whore" and when Sheldon points out that Mary Magdalene was also "a woman of ill-repute", Ms. Cooper says: "When your idiot brother redeems mankind, he can date whoever he wants" (9.1). Sheldon's father is deceased, but Sheldon sometimes talks about him and it is apparent that Mr. Cooper was an alcoholic and often expressed views such as "women aren't anything but flipping pains in the bottom" (5.19). However, the protagonist has formed his own opinions on other matters which his parents felt strongly about, such as religion, evolution etc., and thus it seems impossible to assume that his misogynistic attitudes are merely the result of his parents' behavior.

Considering that Sheldon expresses his most misogynistic views in situations when women appear to have an upper hand in a discussion, it is much more likely that misogynistic remarks are a tool to deal with the loss of power, or with doing something he finds unpleasant but unavoidable and blames a woman for causing it. The first example appears at the very beginning of the show, in the second episode of the first season, when Penny asks Leonard and Sheldon for help with moving furniture: Sheldon tells Leonard that helping Penny will have no effect on the odds of Leonard having sex with her, to which Leonard retorts that men can do things for women without expecting sex in return. Sheldon's reply is: "Yeah, those would be men who just *had* sex" (1.2), implying that in Sheldon's opinion, men never help women or do favors for them without being rewarded – or bribed – by sex.

Another example would be the situation when Amy Farrah Fowler (Mayim Bialik), Sheldon's female friend and later girlfriend, asks him to hold her hand in the cinema. She looks pleased, but Sheldon feels uncomfortable and rolls his eyes at the gesture, claiming that "[t]his insistence on hand-holding is preposterous" and when Amy replies that she likes it, Sheldon comments: "Yeah, of course you do. You're a girl. You like all kinds of hippy-dippy things" (6.2). Several episodes later, they have a fight when he fails to defend her in a disagreement with his friend, Wil Wheaton (playing himself). It is important to note that the show depicts the argument in a quite misogynistic way: Amy is the one who starts acting rude towards Wil, and when he retorts, saying that he will not stay if Amy continues to be "a huge pain in the ass" (6.7). Amy then asks Sheldon to defend her, as if she were incapable of speaking up for herself, requiring her boyfriend to stand up for her no matter whether he considers her actions right or wrong. Sheldon does not come to her defense, and while Amy is upset about his behavior, Sheldon goes to discuss the situation with Penny: "The trouble isn't with me, Penny, it's with your gender. Someday, scientists will discover that second X chromosome contains nothing but nonsense and twaddle" (6.7). He perceives women as completely irrational and unreasonable, distancing himself from what he sees as feminine and perpetuating the view that gender is a strict binary, and that masculinities are constructed as a direct opposite of anything considered feminine, as mentioned in Kimmel in "Masculinity as Homophobia".

One of the misogynistic ideas expressed on the series, and also explicitly stated by Sheldon, is that women should be subordinate to men. While the show's humor often works on the basis of gender role reversal, the underlying attitude appears to be that

men should have a say in how their girlfriends or wives behave. Already in the second season, Sheldon gives Leonard some advice, claiming that women need to see a display of physical domination from men in order to fall in love with them: “When a female witnesses an exhibition of physical domination, she produces the hormone oxytocin. If the two of you then engage in intercourse, this will create the biochemical reaction in the brain which laypeople naively interpret as ‘falling in love’” (2.9). Sheldon is shown to rely on the purely biological explanation of human behavior. Yet, as discussed in previous chapters, it is often impossible to ascribe human behavior solely to the biological drives, since such an approach frequently fails to take into account various cultural and social factors, and often erases agency and possibility of change or improvement (Edwards 44). The rhetoric of biological impulses is regularly adopted by the proponents of opinions such as that men’s biology is at fault for violence or sexual aggression (Kimmel and Messner xiii). However, Sheldon also equates biology with the feelings of romantic love.

Later on, when Bernadette Rostenkowski (Melissa Rauch), Howard’s girlfriend, and Penny unknowingly hurt Amy’s feelings and Amy seeks physical comfort with Sheldon, he tells Howard and Leonard that they should “get [their] women in line” (5.8). While at first sight it might appear that Sheldon is merely expressing outrage at Amy being in pain, or his discomfort about being persuaded by Amy to hold her, the words that he chooses clearly indicate that he believes that Leonard and Howard should have a way to modify, or even directly script, their girlfriends’ behavior. A similar idea is expressed several episodes later, when the men want to stay home for the weekend and play online games. Howard advises Sheldon to act like a grown man and tell Amy directly that he does not want to go to her aunt’s birthday party: “Maybe she’ll dig it. Women like a firm hand on the tiller” (5.19). This instance highlights the role of misogyny and power-asserting discourse about women for the construction of the characters’ masculinities, as explained in section 2.2. Distancing oneself from anything feminine and claiming power over women often works as a reaffirmation of one’s masculinity. While Howard is often controlled by women, either his mother or his girlfriend, his misogyny is supposed to assert some power over the women in his life – and other men are expected to respond affirmatively, hinting at the constant policing of men by other men explored by Kimmel (*Guyland* 47). Sheldon is thus directly influenced not only by his parents’ views, but also by the men around him, who express their thoughts about women’s behavior and preferences.

While Sheldon previously expressed the opinion that men should be able to influence or change what their girlfriends do or say, he furthers these claims by stating that doing something his girlfriend wants is considered enslavement. He even talks about Amy in a derogatory way: “I always thought if I were ever enslaved, it would be by an advanced species from another planet, not some hotsy-totsy from Glendale” (5.19). Considering how many times Amy has done something against her will or wishes in order to make Sheldon happy, it is clear that he thinks that is how their relationship should work: Amy makes compromises while he is not required to do the same. As Calvin Thomas explores,

most heterosexual men are so concerned with the maintenance of their sovereign selfhood that they cannot tolerate its infringement by another. They seek instead to be always the destroyer, to refigure women in their own interests but to resist such refiguration themselves. In this case the transformational possibilities offered by the limited destructions of erotic intimacy are perverted into the very real destruction of one partner, the woman, whose sense of self is not merely refigured but systematically dissipated.

(Kegan Gardiner 73)

In Sheldon’s behavior, it becomes apparent that *heterosexual* in this definition may be understood as men in a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a woman, considering that the inability to tolerate infringement into their selfhood pertains to asexual men in relationships with women. Amy’s self and her needs and wishes are systematically repressed, undermined, and even dissipated, as Thomas claims, throughout the show: despite the fact that Sheldon sometimes makes compromises for Amy’s sake, it is always after a great deal of persuasion from either Amy or their friends, and Sheldon expresses his irritation rather clearly and loudly. When a woman wants something, she is enslaving a man and being unreasonable. Sheldon also expresses outrage at the idea that Amy has “refigured” him, even though his friends say she has changed him for the better: “No, I’ve changed. Like the frog who’s put in a pot of water that’s heated so gradually he doesn’t realize he’s boiling to death” (7.16). Any influence a woman can have on a man is thus perceived as negative by Sheldon, an infringement on his sovereign selfhood.

This character’s most misogynistic moments appear in season nine, after Amy breaks up with him. His hurt feelings manifest in a rather overdramatized negative outlook on women in general: “Women are the worst [...] they thrive on our suffering” (9.1). When he talks to Penny later in the episode, Sheldon states that it is not enough to

be “sweet” to keep a woman: “I blame Madonna” (9.1). This moment, coupled with his previous claims that men do not do favors for women without the expectation of sex, is strongly reminiscent of a specific idea pervasive in the sphere of geek culture: the idea that ‘nice guys finish last’. What this particular phrase claims is that women prefer men who are physically stronger and more aggressive, often treating women badly, instead of men who are nice, understanding and helpful. Still, the phrase’s underlying meaning is even more harmful, stemming from the male feeling of entitlement to female attention and bodies and from the belief that if a man behaves nicely towards a woman, she is obligated to reward this niceness with romantic and/or sexual interest (Cannon n.p.). Sheldon exhibits this sense of entitlement several episodes later, when Howard asks him what he is looking for in a woman and he replies with a list of expectations: “All I’m looking for is an educated, intelligent woman who shares my interests while retaining her own unique point of view. She should be kind, patient, and most important, unable to imagine her life without me by 10 o’clock tonight” (9.8). When his friend asks him if it is not a little unreasonable, Sheldon acquiesces that she does not need her own point of view, insinuating that he is not too interested in a woman’s opinions after all. Women are not perceived as human beings with emotional, intellectual and physical needs: in this scene, they are sought solely to “play their prescribed role of doing the things that make men feel masculine” (Pleck 60). Despite the initial disapproval with his friends’ plan to get him a girlfriend, Sheldon has realized by this point that a woman in his life can fulfil his specific needs, even if those needs are rather grotesque. He says that he needs a girlfriend to increase his productivity, seeing as ignoring Amy made him do more research than he did previously. He seeks a companion only so that he has a new girlfriend to ignore, and in that, become productive again (9.8). It is also noteworthy that for Sheldon, appearance does not seem to matter at all. Or, at the very least, physical appearance is less important than the traits he has listed: this points towards Sheldon’s asexuality as well, considering that an asexual person would not seek a partner based on physical attraction.

For Sheldon, misogyny also manifests as putting blame for a failed relationship solely on women. He even seems to blame Penny for not telling him that Amy was considering ending their relationship, and when Penny defends herself that it is not her fault Amy thought Sheldon was a “bad boyfriend”, Sheldon is upset and leaves his neighbor’s apartment immediately (9.1). Later on, Sheldon is sitting in their home with Leonard, listing one hundred reasons why men are better than women:

Sheldon: [...] You're a man – the champagne of genders.

Leonard: I may be a man, but I think I'm the one that screwed up on this one.

Sheldon: And you admit it – *like a man!* All you hear women say is 'I'll just have a salad'; 'where's my lip gloss'; 'I think this element should be called radium' [...] [Madame Curie] was kind of an honorary man. She had a penis made of science.

(9.1)

Every positive attribute, such as integrity, responsibility, or scientific achievements seem to be perceived as purely male, to the point where Marie Skłodowska Curie, a world-famous physicist and chemist who won two Nobel prizes, has to be referred to as an honorary man, followed by a claim that she had a penis made of science, which clearly suggests that a penis in this context is more of a metaphor for power, rationality and knowledge than an actual physical body part. The penis “has become the object in which notions of power are grounded” (Kibby and Costello 224). The physical organ is transformed into the phallus, a symbol which “signifies the way in which meaning, sexual difference and identity are constructed through language and culture” (Campbell 74). Sheldon cannot associate rational thinking with women due to his own hurt feelings and deeply bitter misogyny, and so he forces his perception of the scientist he respects into the phallic category of an honorary masculinity, in order to be able to hold on to his own deeply logical and rational masculine identity.

It is remarkable that Sheldon, who does not have any interest in sexual activities, still adopts the ‘nice guy’ ideas and the anger stemming from them. It would appear that a lack of interest in sex with women does not mean an absence of the feeling of entitlement to female attention and subordination. The problematics of gay male misogyny and entitlement to women’s bodies has been discussed in the past several years in various online articles, mentioning problems such as gay males offering unsolicited advice or commentary on female bodies, expressing exaggerated or staged disgust at female bodies, or touching female bodies on the premise that it is unproblematic because they are gay and thus not wishing to have sex with these women (Akili; Faye). It would appear that asexual men in television fiction are not far removed from misogynistic attitudes either, even though they seem to pervade the writing of asexual characters in a slightly different way, as a mixture between heterosexual male misogyny and homosexual male misogyny. Expressing beliefs that women should be subordinate or at least primary controlled by men, that having equality in a relationship is seen as a sign of weakness or being ‘whipped’, or that women are the unrelatable,

impossible-to-understand 'other', points towards the usage of misogyny as a way of constructing an asexual character's masculine identity.

The masculinity rule about 'no sissy stuff' is also explored in the show through the relationships between men, particularly through jokes aimed at each other's masculinity. The homophobic mocking is typically aimed at Rajesh, who most often exhibits what is stereotypically understood as feminine behavior (expressing and talking about emotions, sensitivity, dramatic reactions) and interests (gourmet cooking, cosmetics, weight loss). For example, when Amy tells Howard that men also experience emotional and hormonal cycles, Howard replies that his "male cycle synced up with Raj's actual period" (9.21), insinuating that Raj is to be considered a woman for expressing his anger at Howard. It is interesting that Howard would comment on Raj's masculinity in this way because of their argument about the Indian man dating two girls at once, which, in another scenario, would reinforce his masculinity on the premise that sexual prowess is one of the important factors in creating one's masculine identity (Connell; Reeser). Furthermore, Raj is frequently misread as gay, e.g. by Beverly Hofstadter (Christine Baranski), as in 2.15, or his own parents (5.20), even though he identifies as *metrosexual* and explains the term as a man who likes "women as well as their skin care products" (5.20). Metrosexual masculinity is at times understood as "soft", consumer-oriented and appearance-obsessed" (Flood *et al.* 294); traits that are viewed as the opposite of masculine. Men are not supposed to be soft in any physical or metaphorical way (Kimmel, *The History*; Kimmel and Aronson); consumerism has been historically labeled as feminine (Kimmel and Aronson 527); masculinities are largely constructed on ignoring one's body instead of nurturing it with skin care products (Reeser).

Sheldon also participates in mocking other men occasionally. For example, when discussing the idea of friends-with-benefits in season two, he remarks that the concept of relieving one's sexual desires without the emotional entanglements of a relationship seems practical in theory, but "what I observed, however, is Howard Wolowitz crying like a little girl" (2.21). In another episode, Howard uses a phone application that produces the sound of a whip, to insinuate that Sheldon is 'whipped', i.e. controlled by his girlfriend. Sheldon does not understand the joke. His reaction to the whipping sound is: "You're right, I'm smart as a whip, I should be able to figure this out" (5.19). He discovers the meaning of the whipping sound later in the episode and uses it back, against Howard.

Diminishing each other's masculinity through jokes seems to happen in order to balance the power relations between the men. As Kimmel and Aronson explain:

Men create hostile environments in order to establish or maintain social dominance. [...] The production of a hostile work environment is partially a result of masculine identity performance and male group formation produced through sexist and sexual humor [...]. In particular, men create hostile environments to reinforce certain forms of masculinity and to enhance group solidarity among men. In short, men gain power by calling attention to women's differences or by calling attention to men who do not fit dominant masculine norms (e.g., gay men and men of color).

(404)

This creation of a hostile environment through seemingly humorous, sex-based remarks is visible in the behavior of the *TBBT* male characters towards each other. Howard mocks Rajesh's masculinity after Rajesh starts dating two women, which could be perceived as him strengthening his masculine identity through sexual activity and/or aggression. Similarly, while Howard often pokes fun at Sheldon, it is also true that Sheldon often discriminates against Howard's work, which is an important part of a masculine identity as well, and thus, Howard's mocking of Sheldon's masculinity and sexuality might be an attempt to balance out Sheldon's remarks about his own education and work.

Sheldon's masculinity is not regularly challenged so directly. Much more often, he is treated as a child or an inhuman being, i.e. an alien or a pet, instead of a man behaving in a way other men deem not masculine enough, which is reminiscent of the way asexual people have been presented in the media – inhuman and alien. There are only a few prominent instances of Sheldon being directly correlated with a feminine trait or behavior. When the four friends go for a road trip and they have to stop in the middle of a desert to change a tire, Howard says that every man should know how to do that so that he can save a damsel in distress. Sheldon is shown pointing his phone's glowing screen at the ground, saying that if he sees a scorpion, he is getting on someone's shoulders and never coming down, to which Leonard reacts with a dry comment towards Howard: "There's your damsel" (9.3). More often, Sheldon is mocked for being robotic, inhuman or child-like: for example, when discussing shifts in testosterone levels, Leonard claims that if Sheldon's testosterone levels dipped, he would become a butterfly (9.21). This is consistent with how asexual men have been described or perceived in the media in the past fifteen years, as explained in Chapter 3.

For instance, Kilborn's satirical spot about Sebastian the Asexual Icon was also based in dehumanizing asexuals and portraying them as eternally immature; Porter's article equated asexuals with futuristic robots. Furthermore, various sex therapists invalidated asexuality as having to do with hormonal imbalance, just as *TBBT* often questions Sheldon's testosterone levels (6.6; 8.8; 9.21). Sex therapists have also called asexuality developmentally young ("Young and Asexual"). Masculine – or feminine – traits thus frequently do not come into question, apart from the discussion of hormones. The focus primarily lies within the perceived lack of adult, healthy, or human behavior in asexuals.

Another important part of the 'no sissy stuff' rule that seemingly divides the masculine from the feminine is the way a person handles emotions. According to the rules of masculinity, repressing one's emotions is one of the most important features of contemporary hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel and Messner 54). Within the first few episodes of the show, the viewer learns that Sheldon is not good at comforting upset people, even when it is his best friend and roommate. However, he cannot think of anything more to say than "there there" and expresses relief when Leonard says that he does not want to talk about his problem (1.6). Several episodes later, Penny asks Sheldon to imagine how she is feeling and he admits outright that he does not know how to do that (1.10). His continuous lack of empathy is one of the sources of amusement on the show, but the humor is aimed at his being robotic and inhuman instead of him not being masculine enough. Furthermore, with Sheldon, it would appear that *repression* is not the right term for his handling of emotions: very often, he expresses his feelings, both positive and negative, in a rather excessive manner. He regularly becomes excited about his interests, such as trains, comic books or certain television shows and films. Even among his friends who also fit the description of geeks, his excitement is often treated as too childlike and extremely exaggerated. Once again this contributes to the perception of Sheldon as immature: while Leonard, Raj and Howard often pursue the same interests, he is the most obsessive one and does not place his relationship and the opinion of his girlfriend above his interests. Leonard, Howard and Raj are all occasionally seen making compromises when it comes to comic books, events or merchandise. For instance, in the first season, Penny tells all four men that they are pathetic for wasting their lives on toys, and Leonard seems disheartened by her comment to the point of wanting to sell his whole collection of comic books, action figures etc. (1.14). Even though his decision is overturned the moment he sees that

Penny is not available for a relationship at that point even if he does sell his collection, it is perceived as a mature choice: not being overly excited about one's hobbies is portrayed as a positive occurrence. Sheldon often gets more enthusiastic about the things that he enjoys than about a date with his girlfriend: in season seven, Amy invites him to a Valentine's Day weekend and he is extremely unimpressed, even upset by the suggestion, until she tells him that the trip includes a ride on a fully functional vintage train (7.15).

Sheldon also expresses negative emotions to an extreme that appears immature, rude or irritating to others. This is best exemplified by the instances when he suffers from a cold or influenza and relies others for help and care, or when he is upset about a specific situation that he wishes to change. For example, after his first break-up with Amy, he acquires several cats to replace her (4.2). Together with the stereotype of a crazy cat lady in which cat ownership has become synonymous with hopelessness, depression, and unsuccessful romantic life, predominantly concerning women (Blakeley n.p.), this suggests that the way Sheldon copes with emotions does not, in fact, help with the construction of his masculinity. This stereotype, according to Blakeley, also builds on misogyny and gender bias: a woman with one or several cats might be labeled a crazy cat lady, but for many people, it is unimaginable that a man would even consider owning cats. For this reason, Sheldon's reaction to his break-up with Amy is coded in a way that is stereotypically understood as feminine.

Sheldon might not understand human emotions, and, it would seem, particularly female emotions seem to be puzzling to him, but this possibly stems from Sheldon's misogynistic view of women as unrelatable and impossible to understand. His exaggerated reactions put him closer towards the stereotypically perceived femininity of emotionality and no restraint, in direct contrast with his self-perceived and highly valued logic and rationality, which are stereotypically perceived as male traits. While Sheldon often appears emotionally cold and without any empathy when it comes to other people's feelings, and he consistently claims to base his decisions on reason and logic, he does not, in fact, repress his own positive or negative emotions. Furthermore, Sheldon's lack of empathy is not perceived as particularly masculine: this would suggest that it is the very act of repressing one's emotions, not their absence, that constitutes a feature of masculinity.

This idea is supported also by the fact that other male characters on the show are often mocked for expressing emotions: e.g. Sheldon calls Leonard a wuss when

Leonard expresses discomfort, uncertainty or fear about going to a doctor to help Penny with her job; and in the same episode, Leonard becomes the source of humor when he reconnects with his repressed anger about his mother (9.12). At the end of the episode, he is seen playing with young girls, which suggests that a man letting himself feel anger and sadness about his mother's emotional distance is putting himself at the level of schoolgirls: not only is negative emotional response to one's parents presented as childish, but also as something that only women, or young girls, should be feeling.

According to Reeser, the physical body is also an important part of constructing one's masculinity: particularly ignoring sickness or injury, or overcoming such afflictions, could be perceived as masculine. Sheldon does not fulfill this feature of a masculine identity, seeing as his behavior when sick is similar to the behavior of a spoiled boy. On several occasions, he forces not only his mother, but also his friends to sing him a lullaby, requests soup or hot drinks in exactly the way he likes them, does not show much gratitude toward his caretakers and generally behaves in a very child-like manner. Once again his masculinity is not undermined by being perceived as feminine, but by being perceived as a minor. Furthermore, Sheldon does not ignore his body even when healthy: he is shown to be a bit of a hypochondriac, carefully cataloguing every single process of his body to the point of scheduling his visits to the bathroom and assuming that other people would benefit from the same scheduling (3.21), or forcing others to see if he is suffering from some affliction, such as having a ladybug in his ear (5.19). Sheldon thus cannot be said to ignore his body – rather, he is hyperaware of it, whether healthy or ill, and often makes other characters uncomfortable with his detailed discussion of physical processes.

Disability can also be perceived as less masculine than health and complete control of one's mind and body. For this reason, the fact that Sheldon can be understood as autistic might contribute to the perception of his masculinity. Particularly in later seasons, Sheldon speaks about his inability to understand other people's emotions or even read their facial expressions correctly: "I often misinterpret how others are feeling. Like, I can't always tell if someone is only joking or laughing at me. You know, like, uh, if they're mad at something I've done or just in a bad mood. It – it's incredibly stressful" (8.16). Explanations like these, together with Sheldon's peculiar habits, his inability to understand sarcasm and his perpetual misinterpretation of social situations have contributed to many viewers' perception of him as an autistic character. However, the creators of the show have dismissed those potentially autistic traits as merely

personality quirks, hinting that labeling Sheldon thus would create “too much of a burden to get the details right. There’s also the danger that the other characters’ insults about Sheldon’s behavior – in other words, 90 percent of the show’s comedy – would seem mean if they were mocking a medical condition as opposed to generic eccentricity” (Sepinwall n.p.). Such an explanation is potentially disrespectful to autistic viewers, claiming that it is alright to make their behavior the source of amusement as long as there is no actual label put on Sheldon’s condition, much like autistic people have been the target of mocking and teasing several decades ago, when the diagnosis of this condition was more difficult. The character of Sheldon, exhibiting behavior specific to some mental health diagnoses while being denied the actual label, might contribute to the difficult connection between autistic and asexual communities. While both labels have been denied in connection to Sheldon, he also exhibits traits inherent to these groups. Both asexuals and autistic people have had to build their identities on the denial of each other, attempting to avoid the stigma connected with the other group, and in denying Sheldon both of these identities – as well as calling his behavior merely a personality quirk that can be overcome, particularly through his relationship with Amy – the stigmatized perception of both autism and asexuality has only been deepened. Connecting asexuality with mental health problems and/or disability seems to be a recurrent theme in American television shows, likely resulting from the medicalization of asexuality as not only a hormonal or physical problem, but also as a mental health issue on its own (i.e. “No Sex Please”; *The View*; “Life Without Sex”).

Considering that the ‘no sissy stuff’ rule draws on setting masculinity apart from femininity, it is also important to examine Sheldon’s relationship with women on the show. All male protagonists of *TBBT* seem to have a somewhat troubled connection with their mothers. As Kimmel and Aronson point out, “boys’ separations from their mothers during early childhood in the name of masculine self-sufficiency, although considered normative in boys’ gender socialization, are experienced as traumas that exacerbate their struggles as men to develop close, intimate relationships” (6). However, on *The Big Bang Theory*, it appears that struggles with relationships are connected both to emotional separation from the mother, in Leonard’s case, and from extreme dependency on her, in the case of Howard and Sheldon, and, to some extent, Rajesh. None of these men seem to have a working adult relationship with their mothers: all of them are shown to be still perceived as children on some level, whether they consciously reinforce this perception to gain a particular advantage, ignore it, or actively

struggle against it. Mothers seem to have a strong influence on these men due to an absent or passive father: in addition, “because boys must define themselves in opposition to their mothers in order to become ‘men,’ mother-raised men will develop a disproportionately ‘oppositional’ orientation within which connection with the other will be sacrificed to separation from the other” (Kegan Gardiner 211). The other, in this case, means femininity and/or women.

Sheldon was raised by both his mother and his father, but his father was an alcoholic who did not have that much influence on his upbringing: Sheldon mentions his father making misogynistic comments (5.19) and that once, he unknowingly got his father fired because he revealed that he was stealing from the shop where he was working (9.12). Other than that, Sheldon mostly mentions his mother or his grandmother when it comes to tales of his childhood. The male figure from his family that he seems to value most is his grandfather, who encouraged him to pursue science. However, the grandfather passed away when Sheldon was a small child. It is thus safe to assume that he was raised to a great extent solely by his mother, Mary Cooper, with the help of his grandmother, who he affectionately calls Mee-Maw. Sheldon does not often exhibit much opposition to his mother at first, apart from their differences in opinions about science and religion. When she comes to visit in season 1, Sheldon obeys her orders, despite claiming that he is a grown man and does not need his mother to tell him what to do (1.4). Later in the episode, he asks her if the man she has just met is “going to be [his] new daddy” (1.4). This extremely childish formulation suggests that Sheldon reverts back to a child-like state of mind, or at least exhibits his childishness more freely, when his mother is around. Unlike Howard and Leonard, who seem to be actively struggling against being perceived as young boys, Sheldon assumes the role without much complaint. This once again plays into the stereotype of asexuals being child-like. Actually, his mother becomes the way to solve any problem his friends encounter with Sheldon: when he loses his job because he insults his boss (1.4), when he is upset with his friends and resigns from the university (3.1), or when he first breaks up with Amy (4.3), they call Mary to come the rescue. Inability to cope with hardship and conflictive situations without parental guidance is once again a sign of child-like behavior, one that is most pronounced in Sheldon, despite the fact that Howard lives with his mother or that Rajesh relies on his parents for financial aid. Sheldon is the character portrayed as least self-reliant with regard to independence from one’s parents. Interestingly, the one time that he is seen opposing his mother on a matter unrelated to

religion and/or science, it is when Mary says that she does not think he and Amy are a good match, and that she is glad they broke up. Immediately, Sheldon's reaction is to turn to Amy with a proposal to resume their relationship (4.3). Sheldon's mother then comments that he is "no different from any man. You tell 'em not to do something, that's all they want to do" (4.3). In opposing his mother, he is thus perceived to act in a masculine way, i.e. as any other man. It is significant to note that his opposition is related to his relationship with Amy, contributing to the stereotypical view that people in relationships – presumably romantic and/or sexual – are more mature. This assumption of maturity and masculinity equaling a romantic and/or sexual relationship is consistently present after this episode – while Amy's influence on Sheldon's life can already be perceived only four episodes into her appearance on the show, during the following seasons she consciously and subconsciously continues to change Sheldon towards what is indicated to be a better, more mature, more masculine self.

However, Mary Cooper is not the only woman on the show with whom Sheldon develops some type of a parental bond. Leonard's mother appears in the second season, portrayed as a highly analytical woman, to the point of emotional coldness and distance. She is a scientist and immediately takes to Sheldon, with whom she shares the love for logic, statistics and rational approach to the world in general that can be perceived as odd. Since Sheldon fulfils many criteria for having Asperger Syndrome or some other form of autism, it is possible that Beverly could be interpreted in much the same way, considering that she displays several of the traits indicative of autism. Their shared views and behavioral patterns cause Beverly and Sheldon to develop a close friendship rather quickly. He clearly states that he envies Leonard his childhood and that he wishes he had a mother like her when he was growing up (2.15). She also appears similar to Sheldon in that she is first introduced as somewhat asexual. Sheldon starts talking about Leonard with her, at which point her potential asexuality is discussed:

Sheldon: My theory is that his lack of focus stems from an overdeveloped sex drive.

Beverly: Oh, I don't know where he would've gotten that. Aside from a pro-forma consummation of our marriage, his father and I only had intercourse for the purposes of reproduction.

Sheldon: That seems a fairly efficient arrangement.

Beverly: Yes, we think so. We've both done papers on it.

(2.15)

Sheldon explicitly states that what others perceive as healthy sex drive, he views as overdeveloped or excessive. Leonard's mother seems to agree and states that she does not have sex with her husband. It is interesting to note that while she seems to be under the impression that both parties involved view the arrangement as efficient and acceptable, Leonard is later heard talking about a hugging machine he built as a child, which his father used to borrow, suggesting that a lack of sexual activity is equated with a lack of any physical intimacy. Similarly, Sheldon is portrayed as incapable of providing enough intimacy for a partner, just like Beverly, when in season 7 his girlfriend says that she has a sack of rice with Sheldon's shirt and that she pretends it is him so she can feel some physical closeness (7.11). The show clearly implies that people who do not have – or desire – regular sex are cold, emotionless and inhuman, making life difficult for everyone around them. In fact, the whole episode with Beverly is built on the premise that she had been distant and excessively critical of him as a boy, displaying very little affection for her children which has affected them, or at least Leonard, negatively – a premise supported in every episode where Beverly is either present or mentioned. Asexual behavior is thus conflated with traits such as emotional coldness, harshness and inability to offer family members even the smallest level of parental, marital or even interpersonal intimacy: a view also present in the description of Sheldon.

Arguably, the most influential relationship with another woman in Sheldon's life is his relationship with Amy. Even with her, he shares a somewhat maternal bond, since she is frequently expected to take care of him. Sheldon uses the agreement about their relationship to make Amy do things for him that normally a mother would do for a child, for example drive him to his dentist's appointment. When she refuses, he becomes upset (5.15). In this manner, Sheldon's relationships with women who are not his mother often cross the boundaries into a motherly bond, highlighting his portrayal as a child and his inability to form close intimate relationships with women without referring back to his relationship with his own mother, or without casting the woman in question into the motherly role.

Amy also performs the masculinity-validating role for Sheldon, as described in Pleck's essay:

In traditional masculinity, to experience oneself as masculine requires that women play their prescribed role of doing the things that make men feel masculine. [...] when women refuse to exercise their masculinity validating

power for men, many men feel lost and bereft and frantically attempt to force women back into their accustomed role.

(60)

Amy frequently reaffirms Sheldon's masculinity by expressing admiration and respect for his intellectual abilities. Sheldon, on several occasions, evaluates her praise as the reason why he wants to continue his relationship with her. For instance, after she expresses the belief that his friends might have difficulty achieving a tenured position before Sheldon because he is "so great", he responds: "I must say I go back and forth on this boyfriend-girlfriend thing, but those moments when you worship me really keep you in the running" (6.20). Amy's opinion is greatly inflated, despite her frequent complaints about him: e.g. about the lack of physical intimacy in their relationship, his insensitive behavior, his dismissal of her interests, achievements or wishes etc. Regardless of this dissatisfaction, she often expresses an admiration which borders on worship, exactly as Sheldon has stated: she is worried that other women will steal him from her, talking about how irresistible he is: "Look at his face. How can any woman spend eight hours a day alone with this face and not fall in love with it?" (6.3). Aside from praise and admiration, Amy also reinforces stereotypically masculine behavior in Sheldon, whether through verbal support or through her positive reaction. For instance, while he is playing a game with Stephen Hawking, Amy comments on the competitive attitude by stating that "when one male dominates another, his testosterone level rises" and that "it's exciting to think [Sheldon] might be getting a testosterone level" (6.6). When Sheldon drinks beer and slaps her buttocks, telling her to get him another one, Amy acts pleased instead of offended (7.9). Her behavior can be labeled as masculinity-validating for Sheldon, especially considering how her failure to provide such validation and her attempts to achieve her own goals and wishes in their relationship are seen as enslavement (5.19), as previously discussed. Sheldon even directly states on one occasion that his goal in that particular situation is to make Amy feel "small and worthless" (8.11). What is more, he uses these words immediately after admitting to Penny that he loves Amy. In his perception, loving her does not mean that he should occasionally do what she wants instead of loudly expressing his disapproval or even resorting to revenge.

Sheldon's gender identity is also seen as influenced by the presence of a parental – or, to be specific, paternal – figure. When everyone is invited to Howard's house for a Thanksgiving dinner, he unexpectedly bonds with Bernadette's father, a quiet, usually

morose man. He begins to like Sheldon after Sheldon exhibits some knowledge of football, forced on him by his own father who, as Sheldon claims, made him watch games before he was allowed to do his homework (7.9). Bernadette's father then offers Sheldon a beer, stating that he was never old enough to drink with his father, who passed away when Sheldon was fourteen. Sharing alcohol with a father is portrayed as a ritual of adulthood and an important passing rite of masculinity, and Sheldon, with the combination of beer and Bernadette's father's approval, begins to behave in unexpected ways. For example, he burps out words, even though normally he is very well-mannered. Additionally, when Amy talks to him about his inappropriate behavior, he slaps her on the bottom and tells her to get them more beer, which could be considered a degrading gesture towards her. However, Amy looks pleased about this, as hinted at above: since refined manners are often seen as feminine (Forth 13), it is likely that she finds Sheldon's momentarily uncultured behavior more manly and appealing. This not only perpetuates the stereotype that women like "a firm hand on the tiller" (5.19) as the show, through Howard, has claimed before, but also that Sheldon's usual behavior is merely repressed or inhibited and with the help of alcohol, he relaxes and begins acting in a different, more masculine way.

Another significant relationship with a woman in Sheldon's life is undoubtedly his friendship with Penny. Throughout the show, Sheldon befriends her and is often seen going to her for advice, especially about social situations such as an argument with Leonard or his relationship with Amy. However, their friendship is not portrayed as a one of equals. On most occasions, Penny treats Sheldon as a child, calling him "sweetie" and even discussing him with Leonard as if they were Sheldon's parents (3.7; 3.20; 6.7). Once, she even talks to Sheldon as if he were a dog instead of a human being (7.13). This kind of dehumanization of Sheldon is not uncommon among his male friends either, and he appears to respond in a similar manner to Penny as well: often, he remarks on how unintelligent or simple she is. Often one of his friends explains that Sheldon does not mean to be insulting, that he is merely too open and lacks basic tact in human interactions. However, even if he does not wish to be offensive and is only being honest, it also indicates that his opinion of Penny is that she is stupid, regardless of how many times she helps him with his problems. Furthermore, Sheldon often remarks on how different women are, for example when he wants advice from Penny when she is upset, and he claims to have read a comic strip about women in order to understand how women cope with sadness (3.19). This again positions females as the unrelatable other,

and furthers the assumption that Sheldon behaves in misogynistic ways in order to separate himself from this other and subconsciously assert his masculinity.

In conclusion, the ‘no sissy stuff’ rule manifests in Sheldon through his misogynistic attitudes, which often degrade women as less intelligent, less capable, or simply unrelatable and impossible to understand; and through Sheldon’s incapability of being in a close relationship with a woman without allowing, or on some occasions, demanding to be treated as a child. Misogyny can consciously or subconsciously work in favor of establishing asexual masculinities. If asexual men are perceived as less masculine for not displaying overt sexual interest, they might wish to distance themselves from femininity even further than heterosexual men would. Homophobia also plays a role in this process, and Sheldon sometimes engages in mocking his friends’ masculinities. Nevertheless, he also gets mocked in return about his unwillingness and lack of desire for a sexual relationship or activities. Regardless of Sheldon’s other qualities, his disinterest in sex is perceived as a source of humor and often used by his close friends to describe or treat him as less than human, not fully adult or less masculine than they are. His beliefs about culture and proper manners could be perceived as old-fashioned, and since culture and manners are stereotypically deemed feminine, his male identity is again undermined.

4.2 ‘Be a Big Wheel’

The second rule of masculinity, as explained by Kimmel, states that power, status, and success are all important factors in the construction of one’s masculinity (*Guyland* 46). There are numerous forms in which men assert power over others in order to build their masculinities, and some of the domineering behaviors are also presented in *TBBT*.

One of the ways in which Sheldon establishes his dominance is through staking his claim on physical spaces that also become metaphorical demands for having his status acknowledged by others. One of these is the recurring theme of “his spot”. After Leonard and Sheldon first acquired the couch in their apartment, Sheldon decided which place in the room will be his, based on several reasons such as air movement in the room, proximity of heating, and angle at which he can watch the television (1.1). His spot also puts Sheldon in the direct center of the sitting arrangements, which could suggest his own perceived metaphorical centrality to his group of friends. As Sheldon says to Amy, he feels that he is “the social glue that holds this little group together” and that “they can’t function without [him]” (4.3). In this way, Sheldon’s masculinity is

established through his dominant physical position even in the relatively relaxed setting of his home, and through his central position to the collective. The latter is acknowledged by his friends as well when Sheldon leaves for a day and they discuss how none of them would be there if it were not for him: Penny and Leonard would not be dating, Howard would have never met Bernadette, and none of them would even know Amy (7.11). Furthermore, his spot becomes the source of Sheldon's approval or disapproval, based on how well other people respect this central position: for instance, when Penny explains to Bernadette why she cannot sit in that particular seat, she earns Sheldon's recognition by acknowledging his claim on that place.

As Calvin Thomas explains, the point of masculinity "is to become larger, to take up more space, and yield less of it" (55). The very same struggle to not only acquire, but retain physical spaces perceived as his are strongly present in Sheldon's character. His spot becomes an important factor in the struggle for dominance between Sheldon and his friends. For instance, with Howard, the basis of the argument lies within another locus: a parking spot that Sheldon does not use, but does not want to surrender either. Sheldon's argument in favor of him keeping the parking space even though he does not have a car uses the very same rhetoric he utilizes in discussions of his couch position: "That's my spot" (6.9). For Sheldon, it is not a matter of whether he can actually park; it is a matter of not yielding space, i.e. not yielding any part of his masculinity. That the situation is a problem of two men clashing in terms of asserting dominance over space they occupy is also supported by Amy's statement that Howard and Sheldon are "testosterone-fueled alpha males. At some point, they're bound to lock horns" (6.9). She perpetuates the ideas of late 20th-century sociobiology, claiming that dominance, competition, and violence among men are based in biology (Flood *et al.* 37). Interestingly, these concepts were studied on animal behavior and Amy is a neurobiologist studying the brains of apes and monkeys, which puts her into a great position to cite biology as the source of male aggression or dominance.

The argument escalates when Howard responds to Sheldon taking his collectible item by sitting in Sheldon's couch spot naked, with Sheldon's laptop resting on his naked genitals. Sheldon retaliates by sitting naked in his friend's new car. The assertion of dominance thus once again relies on the penis – or genitals in general – being a symbol of power, much like in Sheldon's remark about Marie Skłodowska Curie discussed in the previous section. Asexual men can potentially exert phallic dominance, not only perceive it in others, even though they frequently fail to use that phallic power

in a sexual way. The problem with phallic power is that “the coincidence of having a penis, performing heterosexual maleness, and accessing political power makes it unclear as to what comes first – the penis or the social power [...] if the penis does not on its own generate social power, other body parts can also be phallic” (Kegan Gardiner 355). In this particular situation, it is indeed not only the penis that acts as the source of this power: it is genitals as a whole, and the naked buttocks as well. When Howard comes to apologize to Sheldon and let him know that he will park elsewhere, and that Sheldon can keep his spot, Sheldon does not accept this solution, because it would make Howard seem like the “bigger man” (6.9). While this is a figure of speech, it is still worth noting that Sheldon chooses this particular idiomatic expression which, when taken literally, is a comment on masculinity. What is more, Sheldon refuses the offer and insists that Howard should use the parking space in order for Sheldon to become the proverbial bigger man himself: in fact, it is not enough for Sheldon to become the bigger man, he also demands that Howards say it out loud and through that, acknowledge Sheldon’s position of the dominant male. At the end of the episode, Sheldon brings the whole couch cushion from his spot to the dry-cleaner’s, insisting that it be thoroughly cleaned: while his argument is focused on the physical, unhygienic factor of having a naked man sitting on it, it could also be viewed as Sheldon recovering his space by eliminating any potential traces of Howard’s naked body from his spot – physical *or* metaphorical.

Sheldon’s struggle not to yield space to others extends beyond his immediate group of friends. The recurrent theme of his spot is repeated in his interactions with colleagues as well, especially Barry Kripke (John Ross Bowie). After an older professor retires, Sheldon and Kripke begin arguing over his old office. While in the bathroom at the same time, Sheldon claims that Kripke is using his spot at the urinal – a space once again connected to genitals. Kripke, who is otherwise seen mocking Sheldon and attempting to humiliate him as a scientist, concedes to Sheldon’s claim of his spot at the urinal, which foreshadows the outcome of the argument for the office. Kripke might tease Sheldon about science, but in the field of the physical, Kripke invariably loses – either through moving to a different spot at the bathroom, or through other activities when they decide to settle their argument with a sports-based competition. While being proficient at sports is traditionally coded as an important instrument in the creation of masculine identities (Connell; Kegan Gardiner; Kimmel and Aronson), Kripke and Sheldon decide to have a competition not because they both excel at this activity, but because they are both “equally bad at [sports]” (5.17). Sheldon eventually wins, once

again proving his physical dominance over another man, albeit in a rather childish fashion – the final round consists of simply bouncing a ball off the ground. However, he is not the ultimate winner: after he attempts to move into his new office, it becomes obvious that the previous owner of the space, Professor Rothman, is still present. He appears in Sheldon's new office naked, and despite his apparent mental instability, his behavior unwittingly repeats the pattern of Howard and Sheldon's previous argument, i.e. claiming one's space through a genital display. Moreover, Sheldon is not content, but he still firmly refuses to "let [Kripke] win" (5.17).

The university becomes the proving ground for Sheldon and his friends in several more instances. The most noteworthy example is likely the competition for a tenured position in season six. Once again, Barry Kripke is involved as the first adversary. At the beginning Leonard, Raj and Sheldon, who are also qualified for the position, do not go openly against one another. However, with the pressure of having to prove oneself as worthy of the tenure, the mutual support quickly turns into a battle for dominance not unlike Sheldon's previous fights about his spot on the couch, his parking space, or the new office. In this case, the locus around which the conflict revolves is more metaphorical than physical, but it is an important space nonetheless, not only for establishing one's dominance, but also for the status and success that tenure entails.

The domineering attitude also extends into Sheldon's relationship with Amy. When Leonard takes her to a wedding because he does not have anyone else to go with him, Sheldon displays one of the rare instances of physical violence towards another person, however benign. After Leonard says that he had a nice time with Amy and phrases it in an unfortunate way that could be understood as a sexual innuendo, Sheldon, who usually does not react to any possibility of a sexually-themed joke, slaps Leonard on his shoulder: "Leonard: Ow! Why'd you do that? Sheldon: To send a message. She is not for you. Leonard: What? Sheldon: Not for you!" (5.13). Sheldon might be expressing jealousy or even a certain level of caring for Amy, however, the situation can also be read as Sheldon's display of dominance, and his ownership of her. By taking Amy to the wedding, Leonard has encroached on Sheldon's asserted space, and Sheldon's argumentation closely resembles his argumentation about his spot. Several episodes later, Sheldon explicitly states that he does not own Amy. Yet, when Stuart takes her to the cinema, Sheldon is visibly uncomfortable, despite his denial. Eventually he goes to the theater and asks Amy to be his official girlfriend, even though he is obviously unhappy about the label. It is worth noting how Sheldon defines the

shift from them being friends into Amy being his girlfriend: “With the understanding that nothing changes whatsoever physical or otherwise I would not object to us no longer characterizing you as not my girlfriend” (5.10). Sheldon proposes an asexual, potentially even queerplatonic⁹, relationship, expressing discomfort with Amy dating other people. Despite metaphorically claiming Amy as his own, he still does not wish for physical intimacy or a romantic and/or sexual relationship with her. This situation could hint at another difficulty for asexual men: one of the important factors in the creation of masculinities is often a dominant position over the female partner. This domination is also frequently connected to phallic power, which, in its literal, physical form, could be inaccessible to an asexual man: “part of the significance of intercourse understood in its ideological aspect is its assertion not just of the woman’s penetrability but of the man’s impenetrability, the exclusive designation of his body by its seamless, phallic mastery” (Kegan Gardiner 73-74). An asexual man might resort to other means of asserting his dominance in a relationship instead of intercourse: in Sheldon’s case, this is one of the potential reasons why he proposes to sign a Relationship Agreement with Amy, in the same way he has a Roommate Agreement with Leonard. When Amy expresses doubts about it, Sheldon advises her to hire a lawyer, something that he might perceive as a possibility, but which is very unlikely to happen.

Success, power, and status can also be established through sexuality, i.e. sexual interest, sexual aggression and sexual prowess (Connell; Kimmel). As seen on the example of asexual men who talked about their masculinities with Przybylo, sexuality plays an important role when examining the intersections of masculine and asexual identities. Sex is put in the position of an imperative and knowing who one is sexually becomes a crucial point in developing a sense of self. Furthermore, bonding activities among men center around the sexual from early puberty (Przybylo, “Masculine Doubt”). All of these factors contribute to the difficulties asexual men might have in negotiating their masculine identities without the category of the sexual. In *TBBT*, Sheldon’s asexuality is established early on, and the way that he negotiates his masculinity with regard to sexuality differs from the other male characters, who visibly strive for a sexual relationship with a woman and perceive their sexual experiences as important.

⁹ A queerplatonic relationship is a relationship that is not romantic or sexual but involves a close platonic emotional connection beyond what most people consider friendship. The commitment level in a queerplatonic relationship is often considered to be similar to that of a romantic relationship.

Arguably, the most influential relationship with a woman in Sheldon's life is his relationship with Amy. Despite the fact that she is first also introduced as asexual, in the later episodes her asexuality shifts to hypersexuality, letting her exhibit the sexual aggressiveness and interest typically associated with men. In the first episodes after they meet, Amy seems content about not having sex (3.23; 4.1). However, in the tenth episode of season 4, she briefly meets Penny's ex-boyfriend Zack Johnson (Brian Thomas Smith) and is subconsciously attracted to him. Consequently, Amy attempts to hold Sheldon's hand as an experiment – regardless of the fact that she has said he is her friend, not boyfriend, only minutes previously – and she concludes that she does not feel anything in terms of sexual attraction (4.10). Nonetheless, in the rest of season four and the following seasons as well, Amy grows decidedly more sexual in speech and conduct, to the point of often making people around her feel uncomfortable with her insinuations about potential homoromantic or homoerotic feelings towards her female friends (4.17; 5.3). These undertones can also be perceived as Amy's shift towards a more stereotypically masculine sexuality: her sexual aggressiveness is not only centered on Sheldon, but also on the women in her life.

The most interesting shift can be observed in the dynamics of Amy and Sheldon's relationship before and after Amy's encounter with Zack. Before that, Amy seems much more comfortable expressing her own needs, such as telling Sheldon that she will not go have Chinese food with him because she feels suffocated, or simply ask him to talk to her mother (4.5). Initially, she also has no problem with terminating their relationship over a dispute about which of their respective scientific fields is more important (4.2). After her sexual awakening, Amy is much more likely to bend her will in order to appease Sheldon, and frequently asks for physical intimacy as payment for her help. For instance, in the eighth episode of season 5, she negotiates physical intimacy when she is upset because Bernadette and Penny did not include her in a shopping trip:

Amy: Proposal: One wild night of torrid lovemaking that soothes my soul and inflames my loins.

Sheldon: Counterproposal: I will gently stroke your head and repeat, 'Aw, who's a good Amy?'

Amy: How about this? French-kissing. Seven minutes in heaven, culminating in second base.

Sheldon: Neck massage, then you get me that beverage.

Amy: We cuddle. Final offer.

Sheldon: Very well.

(5.8)

Sex is Amy's first request, and she only relents when it becomes apparent that Sheldon will not agree to her first proposal. The whole negotiation offers no room for him to reject an intimacy that he is uncomfortable with. The coercion into physical contact is a source of humor: regardless of how Sheldon feels, he is supposed to provide it for Amy, and his discomfort is portrayed as strange. Towards the end of the episode, Sheldon and Leonard find Amy drunk in a parking lot in front of a liquor store. When they suggest they should take her home, she turns to Sheldon again: "Hang on, hang on, hang on. Sheldon, what would it take for you to go into that liquor store, buy a bottle of hooch, take me across the street to that motel and have your way with me?" (5.8). Leonard seems amused by the situation and even joins Amy, also asking Sheldon what it would take. Sheldon looks extremely uncomfortable and slightly confused, once again put into a position where he is forced to consider sexual activity as something he should eventually accept for the sake of his partner. Sheldon's asexuality is put into direct contrast with Amy's awakened sexuality, and her challenging of Sheldon's masculinity through exerting pressure about sexual activity points towards the assumption that as she has become more feminine through her sexual awakening, Sheldon needs to undergo a similar process of becoming sexual in order to be considered fully adult, and more masculine.

In this, Sheldon's masculinity is frequently challenged by Amy's demands of physical intimacy. His situation resembles that of a woman denying sex in the heterosexual relationship: as Penny explains to Amy, such behavior is "Girlfriend 101. Usually the first move is [to] withhold sex" (5.19). Sheldon does not deny Amy sexual contact as a punishment for her behavior. It is his genuine disinterest in such activities that puts him in this position. It becomes apparent that asexual men's masculinities can be challenged simply by their lack of interest in sexual activity: as one of Przybylo's interviewees claimed, asexual men are often led to believe, both by societal standards and by their partners, that "sex is the most important thing" in their relationships ("Masculine Doubt" 231). Refusal to adhere to this expectation can result in damaging an asexual man's own perception of his gender identity, as well as the society's evaluation of him as a man. Asexual men can be perceived as less masculine, or even feminine, if they fail to provide sex and please their partners. Reeser speaks about impotent men when stating that men "might try to remasculinize the self in sex, looking for other ways to give pleasure to another person" and that cultural and societal pressure

might result in the man imagining himself as unmanly because he cannot provide pleasure to his partner (103). However, as previously explained, this assumption can also pertain to asexual men, especially if they are physically capable of performing sexually. Sheldon is forcibly remasculinized in the way the show portrays the situation when he and Amy eventually have sex. His masculinity is redeemed in the scene where they lie in Amy's bed and she is breathless, with a wide smile on her face, sweaty and obviously satisfied. It is difficult to believe that the first sexual encounter of two completely inexperienced people, one of whom has little to no interest in sex, would have such a result. The show forces Sheldon into the stereotypical masculine capability of satisfying one's sexual partner. Furthermore, he is the only one of the four male protagonists who is portrayed as particularly skilled at sex. It becomes apparent that Sheldon's lack of interest in sex is forcibly balanced out by his exaggerated competence.

The cultural and societal pressure for men to be sexual can also be perceived on *TBBT* in the ways other characters talk about the possibility of Sheldon and Amy entering into a sexual relationship. Despite Sheldon's indifferent and often mildly confused view of sex, Penny remains keenly interested in his potential for sex: in season 6, she once again opens the question of "his deal", this time confronting him directly about his relationship with Amy:

Penny: Sheldon, can I ask you a question? You ever going to sleep with Amy?
Sheldon: That's awfully personal.
Leonard: We don't ask Sheldon things like that.
Penny: Maybe you don't; I do. What's the deal? [...] Come on, be serious.
Look, you guys have been going out a long time. She would clearly like to have a physical relationship with you, so what are you doing?
Leonard: All right, we're down the rabbit hole. What *are* you doing?

(6.14)

Leonard's objection to the questioning would suggest that while he, Rajesh and Howard often make fun of Sheldon, they respect his boundaries enough not to ask personal questions about his sexuality, regardless of their motivation. Penny, however, views Sheldon's sexuality as a topic she has the right to discuss – an approach that is cited by many asexuals as something they have to deal with every time someone learns about their orientation. As described in Chapter 3 in the example of talk shows dealing with this topic, asexual people are often asked to validate or explain their asexuality, and are often treated as if it were their duty to satisfy other people's curiosity even about highly

personal topics which would normally be considered taboo between casual acquaintances, and often even among close friends (e.g. masturbation, previous sexual experiences, possible sexual abuse in their past etc.). Leonard quickly forgets his previous assertion that they do not ask Sheldon such personal questions and demands to know what Sheldon is doing. Neither Penny nor Leonard can understand that one willing partner is not the only requirement for having sex, and that Sheldon genuinely seems disinterested in the activity. Penny only mentions Amy's wishes: Sheldon's preferences never even come into question, and his not wanting sex is treated as a hopefully curable anomaly, or something that must be the result of his conscious (and wrong) decision. Further into the conversation, Sheldon admits that he does like Amy:

Sheldon: Well, first of all, I'm quite fond of Amy.

Penny: Then what's the problem?

Sheldon: Penny, all my life, I have been uncomfortable with the sort of physical contact that comes easily to others – hand-shaking, hugging, prostate exams. But I'm working on it, you know? Just recently, I had to put VapoRub on Amy's chest. A year ago, that would have been unthinkable. [...]

Penny: Okay. Hang on. Are you saying someday you and Amy might actually... get physical?

Sheldon: It's a possibility.

(6.14)

Again, Penny clearly states that she can only see not having sex as a problem. And when Sheldon explains his dislike of any physical contact, the only thing that is interesting to her is whether or not that means Sheldon would eventually have sex with Amy. At first glance, Sheldon's explanation would suggest that not being interested in sex is simply something an asexual person has to work on. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that Penny's leap towards the sexual is taking Sheldon's words too far: he merely states that he is working on overcoming his aversion to touch with Amy, possibly to make her happy. Sheldon overcoming this aversion and slowly becoming accustomed to touch does not necessarily mean that he will suddenly develop the capacity for sexual attraction or the desire to engage in sexual activity.

Amy herself exerts increasing pressure on Sheldon: the progress in their relationship is measured strictly by the levels of physical intimacy that he allows. When directly confronted about whether or not he will ever have sex with her, Sheldon states that he has not ruled out the possibility in the future – his asexuality is presented as something with the potential for change (6.23). Despite holding the power of denying

sex to a partner, ultimately Sheldon does not have the chance to firmly state that he does not wish to have physical intimacy as a part of his relationship, i.e. that there are more important things for him than sex, much like for the interviewee in Przybylo's article. He is often portrayed as oblivious to social cues, but he comments indirectly on his situation with Amy while discussing Raj's new girlfriend, Emily:

Raj: To be truthful, Emily and I haven't dated that long, and we never agreed to be exclusive to each other.

Sheldon: Have you had intercourse?

Raj: No.

Sheldon: Well, stick to your guns. There will be a lot of pressure.

(7.23)

Incidentally, Raj is also the only character who comes to Sheldon's defense on the issue of having sex with Amy, even if it only happens once during the nine seasons of the show. Raj voices his opinion to Amy that "[she needs] to be patient with Sheldon instead of pressuring him to accept intimacy on [her] terms" (7.10). She acts displeased and even mildly asks Raj to leave afterwards, suggesting that she does not want to amend her behavior and that she feels completely justified in exerting pressure on Sheldon.

Even the way Sheldon allows for the chance of him and Amy having sex suggests that he is viewing sex only as a possibility, not as something that he would like to achieve in his journey towards overcoming his aversion to physical contact. As a highly analytical person, Sheldon examines the evidence from his past experiences. His mention of hugging and prostate exams as comparable events suggests that for him, the level of discomfort regarding any kind of physical contact is very similar. This would imply that he also sees sex as only one form of physical contact: perhaps a more extreme one. And since previous data have shown him that he is now capable of applying VapoRub on Amy's chest, something he would have believed unthinkable before, he does not rule out the possibility that one day he will be capable of sex with her, even if he still does not seem to actively desire it. As interviews with asexual people show, they often engage in sexual exchanges simply for the sake of their partners, despite the fact that "sex did not help the interviewed individuals to feel emotionally closer to their partner" (Van Houdenhove *et al.* 183). This appears to be the case with Sheldon. When he eventually submits to the pressure from Amy, he agrees to have sex with her as a gift for her birthday: sex is still not presented as something he

would want himself. It is presented as an important milestone of their relationship, a final confirmation that their relationship is “real”, and a way for Sheldon to grow as a character and as a person. This depiction could be potentially harmful for all asexuals watching the show, due to the subliminal message that a relationship is not real without sex, a stereotype that asexuals have to face frequently in their lives. Only a decade ago, an asexual couple on an American talk show had to answer the very same question from the show’s host, A.J. Hammer: “How do you convince people that this is real?” (“Asexuality in America”). Furthermore, the depiction of sex as an ultimate goal on the road to adulthood, masculinity, and healthy relationships is especially problematic for asexual men, who already have to face difficulties in the construction of their male identities with regard to sexual activities, desires and behavior, considering that many activities in male friendships are centered on the sexual. If, as Connell claims, “marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (81), then authorization of sex as a requirement for attaining the status of an adult man puts asexuals into a perpetual marginalized position. In other words, asexual masculinity attains an ultimately subordinate status, as opposed to non-asexual masculinity which in this case steps into a hegemonic role.

This also becomes apparent in Sheldon’s interaction with his rival: while Kripke often mocks Sheldon in various ways, he immediately shows respect when he assumes that Sheldon is having sex to the extent where it negatively impacts his scientific work.

Kripke: [...] my work would suffer, too, if I was getting laid all the time.
Sheldon: Yes. That is the reason. My work is suffering because of all the laid I’m getting.
Kripke: You lucky bastard.
Sheldon: What can I say, you know? She enjoys my genitals. I am giving them to her on a nightly basis.
Kripke: Okay, stop bragging. You had some brilliant insights in here, but if we’re gonna make this work, you need to buckle down and focus.
Sheldon: I’ll do what I can. But it’s not going to be easy, because when I’m with Amy and our bathing suit areas mush together, boy howdy, is it magic.
(6.14)

Not only does Sheldon immediately agree that Amy is the reason why his productivity has been suffering, he also uses the lie to excuse any further possibility of his work not being up to the expected standard. Sheldon, who is otherwise quick to deny any interest or involvement in sex, actively claims sexuality when it gains him respect from another man and relieves him of responsibility for his scientific failures. He uses sex as power

to retain his status of intellectual dominance and actively reinforces the lie by also asking Penny and Leonard to participate in it: “if Kripke asks, tell him my coitus with Amy is frequent, intense and whimsically inventive” (6.14). The episode itself is titled “The Cooper-Kripke Inversion”, which could be related to the way Sheldon is suddenly confronted with the fact that his colleague’s research is better than his own, thus inverting their roles in terms of intellectual dominance. However, it could also be read as a hint of the reversal of their roles regarding sexuality as power, since Sheldon is the one who gains respect through being – or pretending to be – in a sexual relationship.

Intellectual dominance, i.e. knowledge as power, also plays an important role in the masculinities of *TBBT*. As seen in previous examples, this manifests itself in the field of scientific achievements and academic status, as well as through the assertion of one’s superior knowledge regarding comic books, video games, science-fiction, television shows, and other parts of the modern geek culture. Geek masculinities are constructed through men challenging each other’s level of knowledge about a specific subject: “having asserted a claim over some sector of fandom or other expertise, [the male geek] reaches an uneasy equilibrium with respect to his male dominance over that topic” (Schwartz n.p.). This dominance is challenged through the use of basic questions such as “Have you seen?” or “Did you know?” (Schwartz n.p.). Sheldon uses the latter in particular to exhibit his knowledge of random trivia, such as “Did you know that when Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, he proposed answering it with ‘Ahoy?’” (5.8), or “Did you know the singular of confetti is confetto?” (9.15). Nevertheless, challenging one’s authority over some particular topic does not necessarily include only these questions. Very often, one of the characters says something that accidentally reveals a certain lack of knowledge in a specific subject, and Sheldon is quick to correct the mistake. Furthermore, his friends also use Sheldon as a provider of background knowledge in arguments: for instance, Leonard utilizes him to win a fight with Raj about zombies and mummies (6.9), either because he knows Sheldon will be able to explain the difference in clearer terms, or because he has previously heard his argument. These challenges within geek masculinities have three possible outcomes: “1) the two accept each other as more or less equals; 2) one establishes dominance but accepts the other as a sort of informal acolyte; or 3) one is humiliated and is forced to disengage” (Schwartz n.p.). In Sheldon’s case, the first outcome is almost never the case. Not only does he apply his knowledge to assert his intellectual dominance, but is also used by others to force other men to disengage by

humiliating them and proving them wrong. Thus, it becomes apparent that intellectual dominance plays a crucial role in the construction of Sheldon's masculinity: intelligence and memory become another metaphorical space which he refuses to yield.

Examining the second rule of masculinity on the character of Sheldon Cooper delineates how asexual men can utilize mechanisms of power to assert their domination. Both physical and metaphorical spaces play an important role in establishing dominance over others, despite the fact that the use of phallic power is sometimes less accessible to an asexual man. The concepts of status and success appear equally available to men regardless of their sexuality, as is intellectual dominance. In fact, superior knowledge or intelligence frequently seem to be connected to the asexual male character, considering that intellectual achievements are often coded as a direct opposite of physical pleasure or sexual desires. In this, knowledge, intelligence and logic become important factors in the creation of Sheldon Cooper's masculinity. However, he is sometimes placed in a defensive or even submissive position regarding sexual activities. Regardless of his constant approach to sex as something he does not desire in any way, he is presented as a man of great sexual prowess, i.e. more than capable of satisfying his girlfriend when he chooses to do so. It becomes apparent how important sexual capability is for the construction of masculinities, even in characters that show no interest in sex. Sexual prowess not only serves to establish Sheldon as truly masculine with regard to Amy and himself, but also brings him respect from other men. *TBBT* thus places in the forefront the various ways in which asexual men often have to yield to the demands of their partners, based on societal expectations, and also the forms in which they are required to perform sexual interest or desire for the sake of other men, in order to be perceived as masculine and thus more human, or at least more easily accepted by the society.

4.3 'Be a Sturdy Oak'

The third rule of masculinity prescribes that a man should exude an air of toughness, confidence, self-reliance and also reliability. Others should be able to rely on him during a crisis, and as Kimmel describes, "what makes [a man] so reliable in a crisis is not that he is able to respond fully and appropriately to the situation at hand, but rather that he resembles an inanimate object. A rock, a pillar, a species of tree" (*Guyland* 46). Emotions are perceived as a vulnerability to be avoided. Men are told to strive for independence, rationality and competitiveness as highly masculine traits (Feasey 23). This necessity to resemble an inanimate object appears similar to the perception of

asexual people: emotional detachment or even coldness has been a part of the description of an asexual since the early mentions of a lack of sexual attraction in people, in the 19th century (Krafft-Ebing). In the media, asexuality has been described as “the first step you take when you decide to become nonhuman” (Bell 20) and asexuals have often been perceived as robotic or inhuman (MacInnis and Hodson; Porter; Tucker). Examining the overlap between the stereotypical dehumanization of asexuality and the deliberate emotionlessness of traditional masculinities thus becomes crucial in the discussion of how asexual masculinities are created and presented in television fiction.

Sheldon enacts this emotionless state from the very beginning of the show. In the first episode, Leonard tells Sheldon that he should widen his circle of friends, to which Sheldon responds with:

Sheldon: I have a very wide circle! I’ve 212 friends on MySpace.

Leonard: Yes and you’ve never met one of them.

Sheldon: That’s the beauty of it.

(1.1)

Sheldon evidently perceives friendships as unnecessary. Even later on, when Amy expresses her doubt over whether he will be able to make any more friends in the future, he replies that he does not want any more (6.20). Sheldon’s marked aversion towards emotional attachment is a recurrent theme throughout *TBBT*. At one point, he states that “the idea of satisfying one’s sexual appetite – assuming one is afflicted with such – without emotional entanglement [...] seems imminently practical” (2.21); on another occasion, he accuses Amy, Penny and Leonard that they “poisoned [him] with emotions” (9.04). This behavior, highlighting Sheldon’s emotional independence, could seemingly reinforce his masculinity through the assumption that a “real man” is supposedly emotionless and resembles an inanimate object without feelings. However, as explored in section 4.1 of this chapter, Sheldon’s reaction to emotions, be it his own or other people’s, is often depicted as excessive instead of deliberately suppressed. His inability to understand or experience certain feelings is frequently coded as odd instead of masculine. His lack of empathy or his statements about not wanting more friends seem more reminiscent of the depiction of asexual people as unsociable loners who want to be alone, which is based on the assumption that a life without sexual relationships must be depressing, terrible and empty (Decker 117-118).

In addition, Harris explains that towards the end of the 20th century, a shift in the perception of masculinity can be observed in the messages about masculinity found in the society:

norms about appropriate male behavior vary from classical messages that men ought to be aggressive, tough, unemotional, success oriented, and macho to notions of men being nature lovers, nurturers, and scholars [...] Twentieth century men have to adapt to highly sophisticated technological societies. [...] In contemporary families mothers also work, so many fathers must assume parenting responsibilities. In an industrial era, brute male strength produced material comforts. Today, in large corporations, managers negotiate settlements within agreed upon limitations established for business contracts, drawing upon their intellects and emotions to resolve disputes.

(17)

The message about men having to be aggressive, tough and unemotional is no longer universally valid, and men's masculinities are often constructed with regard to emotional experiences and relationships of men in question. As Harris mentions, this is related also to the different work positions men occupy and to technological advancement which often creates problems that cannot be solved through brute strength, but rather through an intellectual approach. Geek culture, while certainly adopting some of the aggressive strategies for establishing one's male identity, also relies on intellect more than brute force, on knowledge instead of physical strength. These differences create challenges for the patriarchal notions of masculinity and call them into question:

a condition noticed by the researcher Joseph Pleck (1976) who distinguished between the traditional male role (characterized by physical strength, impulsive behavior, display of angry emotions, and strong male bonding) and the modern male role (characterized by intellectual and interpersonal skills, emotional intimacy with women, prohibition of anger, rational control of behavior, and weak male bonding).

(Harris 18)

In addition, Beynon claims that the modern male role, or the role of a 'new man', can be characterized both as a space for change towards "a new and improved version of masculinity cleared of some, if not all, of the less endearing attributes of traditional, patriarchal masculinity" (99), but at the same time, the 'new man' concept is treated with humor or even ridicule when "some of the alleged features of the new man, such as connecting with his inner self, are mercilessly lampooned" (99). This ridicule is apparent in the representation of Sheldon's masculinity, which adheres neither to the traditional male role criteria nor to the modern male role ones. He exhibits impulsive

behavior at certain times and definitely displays angry emotions, but lacks physical strength or the ability for strong male bonding. While he is intellectual and rational, his interpersonal skills are found lacking, and his emotional intimacy with women is halting at best. As analyzed in sections 4.1 and 4.2, the women in his life are often pushed into a certain degree of a motherly relationship with him. Among his friends, Sheldon cannot establish his masculinity through emotionlessness, as this criterion is no longer fully in line with the construction of male identities in his particular peer group – whether it is in academia or among other geeks, both of which adhere more to the modern male role standards than to the traditional criteria of physical strength and aggression.

Emotionlessness also calls into question how asexual men are perceived through the lens of homophobia often inherent in the construction of masculinities. Emotionality is often connected to the feminine, and while the modern male role includes emotional intimacy with women, the assumption that overt emotionality is feminine and undesirable in a man is still present. As Connell explains, this assumption is rooted in the positioning of masculinity as the direct opposite of femininity and the stereotypical view of homosexual men as more feminine, e.g. more emotional, effeminate, etc. Through this assumption, homosexual men are emasculated as too emotional, i.e. feminine, while asexual men potentially face the prejudice of not being emotional enough to be perceived as adhering to the modern male role expectations. Due to the shifts in the perception of what a modern man should act like, emotionlessness does not provide the same affirmations of stoic masculinity as it once had. This can be observed in *TBBT* on the examples of Rajesh and Sheldon: while the former is often mocked for the behavior seen as feminine by his friends (as explored in 4.1 above), the latter is continuously described as being robotic, alien, or otherwise inhuman. The way men police each other's behavior does not allow for either extreme of the emotionality scale: overt emotionality is seen as too feminine, and failure to exhibit an appropriate amount of emotion is understood as inhuman. It is the act of repressing and ruling one's emotions, not their lack, which constitutes a feature in creating one's masculinity ('no sissy stuff').

In relation to friendship, there is a marked difference between the ideology of male friendships or emotions, and the behavior men exhibit in reality. Men often report their behavior in a slightly altered way that aligns more closely with what they perceive is more masculine, or describe their friendships and relationships in specific ways that reinforce the ideology of men as rational, not overly emotional, and thus markedly

different from women (Kimmel and Messner 303-304). This points to the way men typically perceive friendships: not only as a form of socialization, but as a source of validation of their masculine identities. As Kimmel states:

One male friend – particularly one who is not a target of bullying, but one who seems to be successful at masculinity – can stand in for an entire peer culture and validate a guy’s sense of himself as a man. [...] Friendship is [...] based on suppression of emotion, false bravado, and toughness, a mutual recitation of allegiance to the Guy Code. Developing a genuine friendship [...] means being strong enough to show vulnerability, independent enough to brave social ostracism, courageous enough to trust another. A male friend reminds you that you are a man; he validates your gender identity. Even if everyone else says you’re a wimp, a male friend provides a counterpunch, a reference point that says “no, you’re not, because I’m your friend.”

(*Guyland* 278-279)

It appears that developing a real friendship with another male fits within the parameters of masculinity set by the ‘be a sturdy oak’ rule: confidence, independence and strength are all characteristics valued as masculine, despite the fact that in this particular situation, these traits come from vulnerability, trust and emotional attachment. Friendship serves as validation of masculinity. Being friends with a man one perceives as masculine means, by proxy, that one has to be masculine as well, because no real man would be friends with a wimp. In this regard, Sheldon often fails to establish this kind of masculinity for himself: he does not consciously reassure his friends about their masculinities, despite the fact that he is frequently used passively in the process of one of them asserting or reclaiming his masculinity. For instance, when Raj expresses his frustration about being the only one from their group not to have a girlfriend, his greatest concern is not only that he is the last single man out; it is that Sheldon has managed to find a girlfriend before him: “Do you have any idea what it’s like to be the only one without a girlfriend? Even if I get one someday I’ll still be the guy who got a girl *after Sheldon Cooper!*” (5.19). Sheldon is perceived as ranking the lowest in terms of masculinity: his friends are not reassured in their own gender identity by virtue of being friends with a markedly masculine man, but rather use Sheldon in contrast to themselves, i.e. to reassure themselves that they are at least more masculine than Sheldon.

Sheldon is also far removed from the concept of self-reliance listed as a requirement in the third rule of masculinity. Self-reliance as a trait directly clashes with child-like behavior and emotional as well as mental immaturity, which are

characteristics Sheldon is often ascribed on the show. As examined in section 4.1, Sheldon is depicted as most heavily reliant on parental guidance when he lets his mother influence his decisions, even if Mary Cooper sometimes uses reverse psychology instead of direct advice (3.1; 4.3). Moreover, his friends, especially Leonard and in later seasons, Penny, act as parental figures, furthering the idea that Sheldon is not a self-reliant adult. He does not counteract this assumption. His reliance on other people is most pronounced in his demands to be driven to shops, medical appointments etc. He does not possess a driver's license, which could be viewed as metaphorical immaturity, considering that a driver's license in the United States also often serves as an identification card and as such can be perceived as a rite of passage into adulthood. Sheldon claims that he is "too evolved" for driving (2.5) when he refuses to learn, and he remains completely reliant on other people's cars as a mode of transportation.

The notion of independent movement becomes an important motive in the development of Sheldon's character with regard to self-reliance. Despite the fact that the 'sturdy oak' rule explains masculine men as immovable objects, movement becomes an important part of independence in the ideal of a 'frontiersman':

Men learn to look out for themselves, relying on their own wits and brawn. They do not want to answer to any boss. Rugged individualistic males aggressively defend their own turf. Hiding their emotions, they ride tall in the saddle. This pioneering aspect of masculinity, which Marc Gerzon labelled 'frontiersman' (1982), is deeply embedded in cultural norms in the United States, a country developed by European immigrants who carved their homes out of the wilderness.

(Harris 133)

Deliberate movement through the unknown for the sake of exploration, defending one's property or space, and asserting individuality and independence – these notions contrast with the ideal of a man as an immovable, inanimate object and complement it. A real man thus becomes someone who cannot be moved unless it is his will to do so. In the last episode of season 7, Sheldon initiates such deliberate movement as well, when he becomes overwhelmed by the changes in his life and decides to leave his friends for a vacation on his own. The trip could be understood as an escape from his problems. Yet, Sheldon states that he needs to leave in order to think (7.24) and shifts the reasoning behind his trip towards a (sub)conscious quest for finding and asserting his adulthood as an identity based on independence. Furthermore, the trip can also be explained as a search for a male identity, considering that being independent rather than relying on

friends or family is often perceived as a masculine trait (Feasey 23). Moreover, adventure is also often understood as masculine: men, who are given the freedom to assert power and identity through applying forces to the outside world, use adventure as one of the ways to assert these powers (Kimmel and Messner 163). Through this journey, Sheldon is possibly attempting to achieve this kind of independence and self-reliance, i.e. assert certain powers over the world as he knows it. Considering that it is not in his power to stop the changes in his life from happening, Sheldon asserts power over his own life in a way unprecedented for him and leaves alone, without plans about his destination. When Leonard points out at the train station that Sheldon does not even have a toothbrush or a change of clothes with him, he replies that he will buy everything he needs along the way (7.24). This response shows a certain shift towards more independent thinking, considering that Sheldon has been previously portrayed as extremely meticulous in his packing and preparations. Moreover, when Penny asks where he is going, Sheldon answers that “it doesn’t matter” (7.24). In this case, the journey becomes the destination itself, an assertion of power over his life. Furthermore, the dialogue at the train station is again reminiscent of a relationship between parents and a child, where Penny and Leonard are cast into the roles of worried parents reluctant to let their child go on a trip alone, and Sheldon is portrayed as a rebellious child. While Penny eventually takes Sheldon’s side and says that Leonard should let him go, she insinuates that Sheldon should be able to take care of himself mainly because Leonard taught him how (7.24). Sheldon, who has been consistently treated as their son throughout the show, thus achieves at least a minor degree of independence when his metaphorical parents allow him to fly solo.

Without a driver’s license, Sheldon is dependent on public transportation, and his adventure eventually ends in seeming failure. After forty-five days, his possessions are stolen and he is first seen wearing only a shirt, underwear and one sock. It is not enough that he has lost money, identification and his other possessions: he is also half-naked. As explained in sections 4.1 and 4.2, genitals and buttocks are often connected to the perception of power. In a sense, male pants become a representation of power as well, just like in the phrase ‘to wear pants in the family/relationship’, meaning to be in charge (Kimmel and Aronson 65). In this case, the unwilling display of naked legs and underwear represents loss of power. Sheldon has “embarked on a railroad journey of healing” (8.1), but the result is not finding independence, becoming self-reliant and through it, asserting his masculine identity. His adventure ends in failure when he has to

call Leonard to help him get home. Sheldon expresses the belief that the trip did not help or change him in any way: “I wish I’d never gone on that trip. I feel no better now than when I left” (8.1). In the end, adventure or travel does not provide the opportunity to resolve the crisis of masculinity that stems from the conflict between the public and the private (Edwards 17) or from the notion that men and women are both similar and fundamentally different (MacInnes 11). As discussed in 2.2, masculinity is not only in crisis, but it could be said that masculinity in itself *is* crisis, and a search for a male identity cannot have a stable ending. However, Sheldon is rewarded, in a way, when Amy and Leonard agree that the experience has changed him somehow, or that he has, at the very least, “accomplished something” by proving that he could go on a trip alone, despite how it ended (8.1). Amy’s statement even seems to echo the idea that a quest for independence and identity is a difficult and unpredictable one, and the difficulties are often the destination to which one must travel: “So what if it didn’t all go your way? That’s what makes it an adventure” (8.1). In the end, Sheldon is proven not to have changed very much when he becomes incredibly upset about Penny’s new hairstyle. Still, it is possible to understand his attempt to take the trip as the goal itself. The most important part of his journey is not that he failed in the end, but that he attempted to take it in the first place. Sheldon’s seeming stagnation can also be interpreted as a mirror for asexual men’s struggles: an attempt to metaphorically move forward in their lives is destined to fail due to the heteronormativity understanding of moving forward as moving towards a committed sexual relationship. The same season that begins with Sheldon’s failed journey ends with Amy’s dissatisfaction with his lack of interest in sex, also hinting at the perceived stagnation on his part. Amy’s contribution to her boyfriend’s evolution towards a more adult, more masculine identity is also emphasized later in season 8, when Sheldon admits that even though Leonard is still driving him everywhere, Amy has been teaching him how to drive (8.12).

Sheldon’s trip also reflects on the use of confidence as a feature in constructing one’s masculinity. Sheldon feels confident in his superior status over Leonard, which he exhibits when Leonard arrives to pick him up at a police station, after Sheldon was robbed on a train. Sheldon is asked why he called his best friend instead of his girlfriend when he needed help.

Sheldon: The reason I called you is because I didn’t want Amy to know I couldn’t make it on my own.

Leonard: What’s the big deal?

Sheldon: Oh, of course it's no big deal to you. You idolize me, and nothing could ever knock me off that pedestal you put me on.

(8.1)

Sheldon is absolutely confident that his friends see him as a role model, idolize him, and would never lose their respect for him. The importance of women's validating power with regard to men's masculinity has already been established in section 4.1. Men might feel "lost and bereft" if women refuse to exercise this validating power (Pleck 60). Amy's admiration of Sheldon is present throughout the show. However, during the conversation between Sheldon and Leonard in episode 8.1, Sheldon indirectly acknowledges the validating power Amy holds over Sheldon's perception of himself and his self-confidence. He has previously remarked that he thoroughly enjoys "those moments when [Amy] worships [Sheldon]" (6.20) – however, in 8.1, it becomes clear how dependent he has become on Amy's approval and respect. Sheldon admits that he did not want Amy to know that he "couldn't make it on [his] own" (8.1), suggesting that asexual men are not exempt from building their masculine identities on the validation provided by an adoring female partner. This insecurity also functions as a humanizing factor for Sheldon: when he admits that he does not want Amy to know he could not make the trip on his own, the audience in the background is not laughing either. As opposed to Sheldon's overt confidence, often a source of humor and laughter on the show, his fear of being perceived as less self-sufficient and by proxy, less masculine, is portrayed as an understandable attitude. The situation only becomes humorous when Amy learns about his reason for not calling her and attempts to soothe him by claiming that she knows he is not perfect, and Sheldon becomes offended and tells Leonard that she has hurt his feelings and he wants to break up with her. Even though his statement is an empty threat, it also illustrates that Sheldon is aware of his imperfections and does not care to have them brought into light by his girlfriend. Sheldon clearly wishes for Amy to think that he is, indeed, without any faults: he understands that the question of independence, manifested in his ability, or in this case, inability to travel on his own, could influence Amy's perception of him. Sheldon's confidence, otherwise portrayed as inflated to extreme proportions in most cases, e.g. when he repeatedly claims that he should soon receive a Nobel prize, is revealed as rather fragile with regard to his relationship with Amy in the eighth season, even though in previous seasons, Sheldon appeared confident in his contribution to their relationship. For instance, in season five, Sheldon claimed that he understood why Amy wanted people to know that she was

dating a great man like him, i.e. to “lord [him] over” other people (5.19). This difference could be explained by the perception of asexual people as inhuman, and by the show creators’ attempts to gradually humanize Sheldon through his relationship with Amy.

Examining the role of media in the construction of masculine identities in contemporary society becomes doubly important when exploring geek masculinities, which are often deeply rooted in the consumption of popular media such as video games, comic books, or science-fiction movies and shows. As Harris explains, the ‘sturdy oak’ rule is deeply entrenched in the images boys and young men perceive while growing up:

‘The Sturdy Oak’ encourages young boys to be self-reliant and tough. Impressionable boys learn this role by watching male heroes on television and in the movies – the stars who show a quiet strength, independence, and a cool confidence – righting wrongs in the world, while not admitting any weaknesses. Men who emulate this bravado promote their own unique style of masculinity – cowboy boots, blue jeans, leather jackets, tattoos, or pickup trucks. A sturdy oak is a courageous man who endures. A survivor, his roots go deep into the subconscious minds of men.

(134)

While this author focuses on the role of cowboys and action heroes on television in the creation of young men’s masculinity, his approach could be easily transferred to pertain to geek masculinities by including figures such as superheroes, science-fiction space explorers etc. Most action heroes were supposed to be idolized by their predominantly white, heterosexual, male audience. In the 1970s, the hero was a violent vigilante, a decade later transformed into a “wisecracking action hero”, and the 1990s started emphasizing intellectual power over raw physical strength (Kimmel and Aronson 183-184). The action heroes who are understood to be part of geek culture, e.g. superheroes or science-fiction protagonists, often adhere to the same principles cowboys or vigilante policemen do: a geek hero might use his intelligence as well as physical strength to a certain degree, but he always prevails over an opponent. The fantasy elements, such as superhuman abilities or futuristic gadgets, might lend a certain distance to the audience, allowing men who cannot fulfil the stereotypical requirements for the construction of a traditional masculinity to indulge in the belief that they, too, could be as masculine as their favorite superhero, if only they had the superhuman strength. The geek hero also tends to represent toughness, confidence, and self-reliance. And in most cases, there is an element of romance and/or sexuality in the story. Considering the lack of openly

asexual characters, it is interesting to examine which characters could be idolized by an asexual geek male.

The character that Sheldon mentions most often and spends most of his time attempting to emulate is Spock, one of the most popular characters from the science-fiction franchise *Star Trek* (originally aired in the second half of the 1960s). The character is half-human and half-Vulcan, an alien race characterized by their adherence to the principles of logic, approaching life rationally instead of emotionally. When Sheldon is asked to participate in the creation of a documentary about Spock, he describes what appealed to him about the character:

I think the same thing that appeals to people everywhere. The dream of a cold, rational world, entirely without human emotion. Spock came from a planet governed only by logic. [...] As a child, when faced with a dilemma, my mother encouraged me to ask ‘What would Jesus do?’ [...] I changed it to ‘What would Spock do?’ [...] The entire point of emulating Spock was to rise above human emotion, which I’ve spent a lifetime mastering.

(9.7)

It is not difficult to explain why a rational character like Spock might hold appeal for a highly intelligent child such as Sheldon. On one hand, Spock is not an aberration from the traditional idealized masculinity on television. He is “super-strong, both in the sense that he has more-than-human physical prowess and endurance, and in the sense that he is super-stoic. He exhibits no emotion; he is calm, rational, logical, unflappable. His lack of affect is not based in cruelty, though” (Berlatsky n.p.). Stoicism is a trait directly related to the ‘sturdy oak’ principle: as Harris explains, “the ‘stoic’ message encourages men to control emotions and deny wounds. A stoic bears hardships with a stiff upper lip” (138). Sheldon, while talking about his childhood obsession with Spock, refers to multiple occasions of being bullied, by his brother or by other boys in school. He emulated Spock’s stoic behavior and his way of thinking in order to overcome hardship.

On the other hand, the aspect of the character that is most relevant for this analysis is that Spock is also often taken as an example of an asexual character in the asexual community. The reasoning behind the assumption that Spock is asexual is his disinterest in sexual activities or even romance (“Famous Asexy Characters” n.p.). Sheldon might have started identifying with Spock as a child in order to be able to overcome bullying, but it is possible that he continued idolizing and identifying with Spock throughout his adult life as well because he provided a male role model without displaying overt sexuality, thus bringing him closer to Sheldon’s experience. The

stereotypical perception of asexuals as inhuman and emotionless becomes evident in the very same episode where Sheldon explains his admiration of Spock. When he reveals that he has an engagement ring he was going to give Amy before she broke up with him, once again he attempts to retreat behind the mask of a stoic, claiming that the rejection did not affect him much. However, Penny opposes him with a suggestion that Spock was also half-human, and that despite his concealment of his emotions, he did feel. Sheldon's role model of pure logic and no emotions crumbles, and he is made aware that he can no longer attempt to emulate an idolized figure that does not actually exist. He is told that his understanding of Spock, and through this character, of himself, has been flawed all along: an idea in line with the stereotypical assumptions that asexuals merely do not know themselves well enough to understand what they truly want. Once again, through Amy, Sheldon is depicted as moving away from a purely rational, emotionless, alien self towards a more human, more masculine identity. At the end of the episode, he emerges from his room and goes to propose to Amy, stating that either she will accept and they will resume their relationship, or she can reject him for good. Through this action, Sheldon finally takes a great risk, uncertain of the outcome, and risk-taking is also an important factor in creating one's masculinity, as commented above (4.4).

Other characters that Sheldon is seen idolizing on *TBBT* also prove that he has been seeking asexual, or at least desexualized, figures to identify with and to think about when he needs to solve a problem in his life. After failing in his train journey, Sheldon regroups by likening himself to Gandalf the Grey, a wizard from *The Lord of the Rings* franchise, which in itself did not include many notions of romance and largely ignored sexuality in general. However, Gandalf can be perceived as desexualized on an even greater scale. The idea of older people being asexual, or even anti-sexual, is indeed pervasive in contemporary society. Merryn Gott explains the myth of the asexual old age in following terms:

On the one hand, we have sexuality, represented by the youthful, healthy, beautiful body. On the other we have ageing, or perhaps more specifically old age, invoking images of physical decline, decrepitude and sickness. These ideas are difficult to reconcile and in contemporary society this is rarely done, despite the increasing number of 'challenges' to the exclusion of old age from the sexualized world.

(1)

Reconciling ageing and asexuality poses its own specific set of issues, considering that while many elderly people might wish to challenge this exclusion from discussions about sexuality, older asexuals might face equal difficulties in having their sexual identities recognized instead of dismissed as merely a result of their age. Nonetheless, this pervasive notion of the elderly as asexual might also contribute to asexual people identifying with elderly characters on television or in other media, relating to the characters' lack of sexuality and perceiving them as safe to connect to, since the probability of an older character being suddenly put into a sexual situation in the media is relatively low. Gandalf the Gray was described in J. R. R. Tolkien's books as an old man with silver hair, and was portrayed in the movie adaptations by Sir Ian McKellen, who was over sixty years old at the time of the release of the first movie in 2001. It is possible to assume that along with his wisdom and power, Gandalf was perceived as a potentially safe character to idolize and identify with for asexuals such as Sheldon. Furthermore, just like Spock, Gandalf does not contradict the traditional depictions of idolized masculinity: in fact, he is characterized in a way similar to Spock, with great strength, some superhuman abilities, rational thinking and great wisdom, and often displays stoicism in reaction to encountering hardships.

Another character often mentioned by Sheldon is Obi-Wan Kenobi from George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga. Just as Gandalf, Obi-Wan is an elderly man in the original movie trilogy, portrayed by Sir Alec Guinness, who was also over sixty at that time. The character traits of Spock and Gandalf are exhibited in Obi-Wan: in fact, stoicism is one of the principles of the Jedi Order, to which Obi-Wan belongs. The Jedi Code, among other tenets, expressly states: "There is no emotion, there is peace. [...] There is no passion, there is serenity" ("Jedi Code" n.p.). As much as Obi-Wan from the original trilogy could have been desexualized based on his age, the teachings of the Jedi Order and its organization as a religious practice rather than merely a military unit are often taken to mean that Jedi are supposed to be celibate – at the very least, the Jedi are not supposed to form any emotional attachments. Once again, a character that Sheldon idolizes proves to be removed from sexuality, making it easier for the sitcom's protagonist to identify with him, seeking his guidance during particularly difficult times. All the characters that Sheldon perceives as having the greatest impact on his life, the characters he either attempts to emulate, likens himself to them or seeks their guidance in times of need, are characters who could be perceived either as asexual, or at the very least, desexualized. This could have been a conscious effort on the part of the show's

creators, or merely a coincidence that illustrates how asexual masculinity might be seen as diverting from the traditional role models of masculinity.

While the ‘sturdy oak’ rule appears to be potentially useful for the construction of asexual masculinities, considering that the concepts of confidence, toughness, and self-reliance are not directly and obviously connected to sexuality, it can also pose several problems for an asexual man. First, the stereotype of asexuals as immature and not fully adult could impact the perception of asexual men as self-reliant – Sheldon Cooper is obviously constructed as a character incapable of living, or even moving freely, on his own. This, in turn, could have a negative effect on the confidence of asexual men: they could attempt to overcompensate, but, as in the case of Sheldon, this inflated image of themselves could become unstable rather easily, especially in a romantic relationship where they might already feel some instability rooted in their partner’s dissatisfaction with the lack of sexual interest on the asexual man’s part. Furthermore, asexual men might have trouble reconciling the images of masculinity in the media with their asexuality. While there appear to be several characters representing the idolized ‘tough guy’ masculinity, with whom an asexual man might possibly identify, these characters appear removed from sexuality either by their age, their supernatural origin, or their position as spiritual guides and mentors. This distance might provide some relief for an asexual man seeking a role model not imbued with overt sexuality, however, it could also play into the stereotype of asexuality as a more spiritually oriented choice and, so to speak, transcending sexuality through some spiritual efforts. Moreover, the concept of stoicism inherent in the ‘sturdy oak’ rule might be difficult to reconcile for an asexual man, already facing prejudice against asexuals as emotionless or cold.

4.4 ‘Give ‘Em Hell’

The fourth and final rule of masculinity encourages men to exude an air of daring, violence and aggression, and to be relentlessly competitive in every aspect of their lives (Kimmel, *The History* 94). Men should “live life out on the edge. Take risks. Go for it. Pay no attention to what others think” (Kimmel, *Guyland* 46). This rule is strongly connected to the idea that men are, and should be, physically violent or aggressive: “in some groups, an aggressive boy is thought of as more masculine than one who shuns aggressive behaviors. [...] Physical aggression is one of the few social behaviors in which scientists see a distinct sex difference” (Harris 134).

Geek masculinities might be somewhat removed from the concept of physical violence, and it is established in the first episodes of *TBBT* that Sheldon and his friends cannot deal with this aspect of masculinity. For instance, when Penny asks them to retrieve her television set from her ex-boyfriend, they end up coming home without the television and without their pants, suffering humiliation from their inability to display enough physical aggression to intimidate the man into giving them the television, despite the fact that there were two of them against one. Losing their pants and having to go home only in their underwear can also be seen as an involuntary display of genitals, i.e. vulnerability, as mentioned in section 4.3.

However, geek men cannot truly be characterized as “peaceable rather than violent” (Connell 67). Competitiveness is definitely a part of their subculture: displays of dominating behavior among geek men usually take place in a fictitious space, such as video games, or relatively safe competitive activities such as bowling or paintball, where the aggression can be expressed verbally or at a distance. However, the creation, affirmation or undermining of masculine identities are never absent from these activities: for instance, when the four male friends of *TBBT* lose in a bowling competition, they can be punished in any way that the winning team chooses. The humiliating experience they are forced to endure by the other (fully male) team is to wear female superheroes’ costumes in the comic book store, the implication being that losing in the competition, i.e. failure to affirm one’s masculinity through victory and dominance over other men even in a benign sport such as bowling, results in emasculation. Leonard, Sheldon and Howard feel uncomfortable in the costumes, and it is interesting to note that the one who comments about feeling empowered is Rajesh, whose masculinity, or lack thereof, is already a frequent punchline among his friends.

As described in section 2.2, the construction of geek masculinities hinges on competition not only in video game skills, but also in terms of knowledge about specific subjects. Geek men strive to be the most knowledgeable among their friends and often treat the less knowledgeable man with derision: Sheldon demonstrates such behavior in relation to comic book knowledge (3.2) as well as academic knowledge, e.g. during a physics competition (1.3). This could also be understood as a display of competitiveness, even though Sheldon behaves as if he did not believe that any of his friends could seriously threaten his status of intellectual superiority and academic accomplishments, even stating on one occasion that he feels like Stephen Hawking might be his only intellectual equal (5.21). On the several occasions when one of his

friends achieves success, he acts jealous or dismissive, and when he is invited to work in a team, he assumes leadership automatically: when Leonard and he are called to speak at a conference about a paper they wrote together, Sheldon strongly insinuates that only his contribution was significant, and that he considers himself the most important author (1.9). When Raj is facing a threat of deportation unless he finds another subject to focus on at the university, Sheldon offers Raj to work *for* him, instead of *with* him, and emphasizes the difference on several occasions, making it clear that he does not consider Raj his equal (3.4). Even when Leonard has an idea for a mobile phone application, Sheldon assumes that he should be the leader of their group in developing the app (4.12), just as he does during a university paintball tournament, where he claims that the other three men are ordinary soldiers while Sheldon awards himself the title of Captain (5.1). The other men mostly react with annoyance to his attempts to take leadership, and on several occasions, ask him to leave the room or the team, be it for a competition or for research. This would suggest that Sheldon does not hold much natural authority and is not considered a leader among his friends. While they frequently give in to his requests, it is portrayed as an attempt to make him stop talking about something, a reluctant acquiescence instead of deference to someone perceived as a leader. Furthermore, the other three men are often seen ignoring Sheldon's claims on leadership instead of acknowledging it, but Sheldon sometimes fails to understand the difference (5.1). This lack of social awareness suggests that asexual men might be stereotyped as less capable of leadership due to the assumption that an asexual person lacks the necessary social skills to be able to correctly decode social situations. As one of the asexual men in Przybylo's research pointed out, a great number of social activities seem to be centered around sex in some way, meaning that an asexual person could feel left out ("Masculine Doubt" 229), not only from social interactions, but also from the competition for social power in a group of friends. Section 2.2 above explored the general structures of masculinities, where hegemonic masculinity occupies the top position (Connell 77). From this, it is possible to infer that asexual men, most likely moving between the categories of complicit, subordinate, and marginalized masculinities, cannot easily attain the status of power and leadership among other men.

Fantasies of aggression also play a role in the creation of geek masculinities. As observed in *TBBT*, there are several occasions on which Sheldon engages in acts borrowed from a television show or a movie, and which are constructed as violent in

their respective worlds. He attempts to use telepathy to harm people when he is upset (1.9, 3.1), his mother mentions that as a child, he built a death ray machine (1.4), and Sheldon confesses to having tried using a technique mentioned in *Star Trek* to render the opponent unconscious (9.7). All of these instances can be interpreted as will towards aggression or violence, despite the fact that they are fictional practices impossible to recreate in the real world. It could also hint at a certain distaste towards physical violence: Sheldon, as a scientist, must be aware that he cannot hurt people telepathically, but the act provides an outlet to his anger. Most of the situations in which he exhibits actual physical violence are related to Amy, once again highlighting her role in the construction of his more traditionally masculine self. For example, Sheldon hits Leonard in the shoulder when he thinks that he has romantic feelings for Amy (5.3); and he goes to Wil Wheaton's house to defend his girlfriend's honor in a fight, even though his attempt fails due to his intoxication (6.7). If an aggressive male is perceived as more masculine (Harris 134), then Sheldon's acts, however benign, suggest a shift towards a more normative behavior, and Amy is the driving force behind it, suggesting that asexual men are perceived as more masculine after entering into a relationship with a woman.

Competitiveness is a feature of traditional masculinity which is perhaps the most notable in *TBBT*. Aside from competing for space, both physical and metaphorical, as explored in section 4.2, Sheldon's competitiveness is also apparent in other areas of his life. Sheldon greatly values his accomplishments and does not easily accept people outsmarting him, as exemplified by Dennis Kim, the 15-year-old prodigy invited to Sheldon's university for a graduate program (1.12). Upon first meeting Sheldon, Dennis claims that the string theory research Sheldon has been working on for the past several years is a "dead end" (1.12). While Sheldon initially takes great offense at such evaluation of his work, several seasons later he also wishes to switch his field of interest (7.20), indicating that Dennis was right. Furthermore, Dennis was given a prestigious award at an earlier age than Sheldon, successfully stealing his status as the youngest person in history to win it. After Dennis corrects Sheldon's equations, Sheldon reacts in a rather melodramatic manner, i.e. compares himself to a cow that has stopped giving milk and should be shot, and then he proposes he is going to "wait to die" (1.12).

The other characters also acknowledge Sheldon's behavior regarding competition: Leonard claims that he is a "sore loser" but also an "unpleasant winner", as proven when Sheldon gets upset over losing in a video game to Penny, who has played

that game for the first time in her life (1.7). Sheldon would much rather win than be a part of a team of equals, as suggested when he is asked to leave the physics bowl team he formed together with his friends, and in retaliation, Sheldon creates his own team, putting himself into the position of the sole competitor, since the rest of his team is only there to fill the required number of participants. He asks a lady from the lunch room and her son, as well as the university janitor. However, when the janitor reveals himself to be a physicist who used to work for a university in the former Soviet Union and provides an answer to a difficult question during the tournament, Sheldon refuses to use his answer, suggesting that he only wants to win if he is the one providing the correct answers. As Leonard states, it appears to be more important for Sheldon to prove that he is smarter than everyone else than to win as a part of a team: his intellectual superiority is a victory greater than an actual prize from a tournament (1.13). Sheldon refuses to admit that he was wrong on several occasions (2.12; 3.2), which often leads to him being defeated or losing a bet. His superiority is frequently the result of his inflated confidence in his own capabilities, knowledge, or skills, and his losses are a source of humor. His inability to defeat an opponent in competition is also exemplified through exchanges of practical jokes or verbal battles of wits, which Sheldon loses more often than not.

Humor often plays an important role in the construction and affirmation of men's masculinities. Kimmel and Messner explore several functions of humor among men: "[jokes] reaffirm values of friendship and generosity, [...] ritually affirm heterosexuality among men whose social circumstances create a level of physical and emotional intimacy culturally regarded as unmasculine, [...] mediate disputes" (309). The usage of (often homophobic) humor for the sake of reaffirming one's heterosexuality was mentioned in section 4.1. Men create hostile environments through disparaging humor in order to establish a certain hierarchical structure, and in order to do this often employ humor with the goal of calling attention to the differences perceived in the behavior of women and also in the behavior of men perceived as less masculine (Kimmel and Aronson 404). However,

humor can also be employed as a defensive strategy to lighten the severity of any purported offense by the communicator. Humor and joke-telling are frequently dismissed as just jokes, with the implication being that those not appreciating the joke are unintelligent (i.e., failure to "get" the joke or appreciate the context), killjoys (i.e., insistence on prudish seriousness), or severely at odds with societal norms and strategies for bonding (i.e., being less human).

All three of these implications hold relevance for the discussion of asexual masculinities, considering that asexuals are frequently confronted with the stereotypical views that they are too conservative, i.e. prudish, or socially inept and less than human (Decker; MacInnis and Hodson). These implications can be directly observed in *TBBT* and in the way Sheldon interacts with other characters through humor. Sheldon often explains jokes, both his own and other people's, which renders them less funny in the eyes of the other characters. His inability to understand sarcasm is also a running joke throughout the show, or at least through the first three seasons. While it could be potentially related to the theories Sheldon as an autistic character, considering that one of the traits often found in autistic people is the inability to comprehend or use sarcasm, the point is also relevant to the discussion of Sheldon's masculinity, even more so when it becomes apparent that Sheldon's inability to understand sarcasm is only temporary. If men use humor to establish their masculinities, Sheldon's unique sense of humor puts him in a position of being at odds with societal norms, and also with the norms of masculinity. He eventually gains the ability to recognize sarcasm at least in some situations, even though he still frequently asks for confirmation; and this shift is also potentially related to his relationship with Amy. As Sheldon progresses in his romantic relationship, he is deliberately ascribed more human traits, e.g. the understanding of sarcasm. While the first three seasons include many instances where Sheldon cannot comprehend or even correctly use sarcasm without asking for an explanation, the situation slowly changes after he meets Amy at the end of season 3. Sheldon slowly gains the ability to recognize sarcasm more easily, and simultaneously becomes capable of using it on his own, without any advice on how to do it. This could be perceived as a deliberate attempt on the creators' part to make Sheldon more human as the show – and his relationship with Amy – progresses.

Sheldon himself is at least mildly aware of the importance of understanding humor as a social bonding strategy. For instance, when his usual barber is in the hospital and Penny has to cut his hair, Sheldon mentions traditional use of humor in a similar social situation: "Sheldon: At the end of the haircut, Mr. D'Onofrio would tell me a dirty joke. Penny: Oh, sorry, I don't know any dirty jokes. Sheldon: That's okay, I never understood them anyway" (5.18). This situation exemplifies his understanding of jokes as relevant to the formation of social structures. Sheldon realizes that jokes are an

accepted social convention, even though he does not possess the ability to appreciate ‘dirty jokes’ himself. At the same time, this scene serves to set Sheldon apart as different, and once again, as juvenile and immature: as an adult man, he is supposed to understand sexually-themed humor, but he fails to do so. The inability to comprehend sexual humor has been a source of contempt towards asexuals in the past – for example, Kilborn’s 2003 spot on *The Late Late Show* featured the character of Sebastian the Asexual Icon, who was portrayed as extremely joyless, prudish, and unable to understand humor or various social situations. These stereotypical portrayals of asexuals as humorless might pose difficulties for the creation of asexual masculinities; further difficulties become apparent when one considers the reported importance of sexual innuendos and jokes for adolescent masculinities (Przybylo, “Masculine Doubt”). Without engaging in the exchange of dirty jokes, so to speak, a young asexual man might fail to establish satisfactory social bonds with other young men and thus might be ostracized. Furthermore, characters such as Sheldon Cooper, ridiculed for their lack of understanding of various types of humor, might reinforce the perception of asexuals as generally humorless and exacerbate the problem instead of offering asexual viewers a suitable role model to identify with. In other words, it becomes apparent that in contemporary popular culture, “mockery and humor are being used in ways that can derogate asexuals or those suspected of being asexual” (MacInnis and Hodson 726). Sheldon exemplifies how humor and mockery can be used against asexuals in two separate ways: on the one hand, he is often the topic of humor, e.g. jokes about him being an alien, which perpetuate the stereotypes of asexuals being inhuman and strange. Other male characters establish their masculinities by setting Sheldon apart, and by positioning themselves as his superiors, in terms of humor or social intelligence. On the other hand, humor is also used directly against Sheldon when other characters deliberately use jokes or sarcasm which they know he will not understand, marking him as different and strange for his incomprehension. After all, appreciating humor is considered a trait that sets humans apart from other species and makes them special (Hodson and MacInnis 64). Without this ability, a person is considered robotic and not fully human, a stereotype brought to attention also by the study in which asexuals were shown to be considered less human than hetero- and homosexuals (MacInnis and Hodson). In this study, one of the human nature traits in the questionnaire given to the respondents was ‘fun-loving’ (MacInnis and Hodson 730). While this trait could be explained in a number of ways, humor can easily be understood as inherent in the

concept of 'fun'. Stereotyping asexuals as humorless can lead to delegitimization of asexuals as a group. As Hodson and MacInnis explain,

delegitimization represents a strategy by which people are categorized into negatively valued social groups that are not afforded protection or rights otherwise considered normative, for the purposes of justifying maltreatment [...] delegitimization paves the way for moral exclusion. [...] this process can take many forms, including dehumanization (seeing others as animals or monsters), trait characterization (e.g., portrayal as brutal), the use of labels (e.g., colonialists) or comparison to other vilified groups (e.g., Huns). [...] we recognize that groups can be also be delegitimized in everyday, more mundane ways, through the use of humor.

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In other words, through humor, discrimination of asexuals can potentially become somewhat normalized and morally acceptable, particularly if humor portraying asexuals in an extremely unfavorable light, such as the humor in *TBBT*, appears in popular media available to a large number of people.

Humor can also carry aggressive connotations and support the creation and reaffirmation of power relations in the society. Competition and aggression can manifest through specific usages of humor, e.g. "where humor is used to put down, control, and manipulate others" (Hodson and MacInnis 66). This particular power of humor is relevant for the discussion of masculinities and competition, especially when considering the usage of practical jokes in order to establish hierarchy among men or to solve an argument without using physical violence. Among the men in *TBBT*, practical jokes are frequently used, be it among friends or between rivals, and Sheldon usually ends up taking the pranks too far, or uses a joke that others do not find funny. One example would be Sheldon's entire relationship with his academic rival, Barry Kripke, who often employs sarcastic, aggressive humor to assert his dominance over the four friends, particularly Sheldon (2.12). However, the comebacks that Sheldon uses in turn are often found lacking. For example, Raj comments with a sarcastic "Oh snap" after Sheldon replies to Kripke's teasing in a very clinical, unamusing way (2.12). Even Sheldon himself acknowledges that he is incapable of answering Kripke's mocking remarks sometimes: on several occasions, he promises to come up with a good way of answering later (3.1), or answers with rather childish and ineffective retorts, such as "why are you such a stupidhead" (3.9). In this way, Sheldon is often humiliated by Kripke, who emerges from their verbal exchanges victorious, using humor to put down Sheldon and even manipulate him on some occasions. Kripke reaffirms his power over

Sheldon, and at times, other men, by way of using humor, strengthening the assumption that asexuals are too strange, prudish and socially maladjusted to be funny. Furthermore, it is not only Kripke whom Sheldon has trouble answering: his long-standing adversary relationship with the actor Wil Wheaton progresses in much the same fashion, where Sheldon attempts to come up with witty responses to Wil's teasing or mocking, and usually fails (3.19).

Beyond these instances of verbal exchanges, Kripke also employs practical jokes, as exemplified by the episode where he releases helium into the office where Sheldon is giving a radio interview, resulting in Sheldon's voice becoming comically high-pitched on a live show (3.9). Sheldon attempts to take revenge by flooding Kripke's laboratory with a foamy substance. Unfortunately, the university's sponsors and directors are present at the time, and Sheldon leaves behind a video in order to let Kripke know who did it, which results in trouble for both he and his friends who have helped him come up with the idea. Sheldon thus fails to achieve victory through a practical joke, because he ultimately creates more problems for himself and his friends than for the man he wanted to prank. Furthermore, he is unaware of how his humor is received by other people: he is convinced that he is a very funny and playful person, and that his jokes and pranks are considered "classic" (2.23), even though they involve extremely old and overused devices. For instance, he suggests using a whoopee cushion against Kripke, which his friends firmly refuse as a bad idea (3.9).

The whole seventh episode of season 7 focuses on his inability to think of good pranks against his friends. At the beginning of the episode, Howard, Leonard and Raj scare him so badly that Sheldon loses consciousness and control over his bladder, which they find hilarious, and keep teasing him about being scared. In order to take his revenge, Sheldon tries to scare Leonard by putting something explosive in the mailbox, but Leonard disables the device in secret and ends up scaring Sheldon himself. Then, he puts a snake in Raj's desk drawer, which does not work because Raj seems to like snakes; eventually, Sheldon uses a hand buzzer supposed to give another person a mild electric shock while shaking hands. This prank turns against Sheldon in the end when he uses it on Howard, who reverses the situation and pretends to have a heart attack as a result of the electricity, scaring Sheldon again (5.7). Despite the fact that Sheldon eventually manages to scare at least Leonard by hiding in their sofa and jumping out unexpectedly, his pranks still seem mostly ineffectual. Furthermore, considering that his attempts, for example a snake or electricity, are more dangerous than the original prank

played on him, and the fact that he manages to prank Leonard when the other man is going through a difficult emotional situation, the situation makes Sheldon appear more vindictive and small-minded than funny, suggesting that his social awkwardness makes him incapable of accepting a prank played on him without becoming vindictive. This could be a metaphor on the treatment of minorities and the usage of humor against them: minorities, such as asexuals, are often asked to either laugh at jokes aimed at delegitimizing and mocking their identities, or they are accused of lacking a sense of humor. Considering that humor appears to play a significant part in the construction of male relationships (Kimmel and Messner 311), lacking a sense of humor can be understood as lacking an important factor of masculinity. And since sex is perceived as an indispensable part of the humor frequently related to masculine identities, asexual men may be perceived as less funny or even humorless, and through it, less human and less masculine.

According to Harris, another important concept for the ‘give ‘em hell’ rule is rebellion, i.e. the advice for men to “defy authority and be a non-conformist” (Harris 142). This concept also ties in with the concepts previously discussed throughout chapter 4, such as individualism, independence, self-reliance, but also aggression, risk-taking, and not caring what other people think (Kimmel, *Guyland* 46). Harris explains that men can adopt the status of a rebel for a variety of reasons, such as survival, anger, justice etc. The image of a rebel is often glorified, particularly in popular culture, where similar images occur frequently. Rebels gain respect and even admiration of other men “when they fight against injustice” (Harris 142). Yet, the term ‘injustice’ is rather vague and open for interpretation on an individual basis. While a rebel can surely fight against injustice on a greater scale, i.e. injustice against humanity, or at least a large group of oppressed people, it is also possible to interpret injustice on a highly personal level, as observed in *TBBT*. Whenever Sheldon seemingly rises against any authorities, it is because of what he perceives as injustice against himself: e.g. when the university refuses his request to change his field of study towards the end of season 7, which is one of the reasons why he takes an unplanned train trip (7.24). Geek culture also factors into the image of a rebel as a valid factor in the creation of masculinities in *TBBT*. As noted in section 2.2, the term *geek* used to carry negative connotations of oddness, social ineptitude, and inability to fit into the societal standards of attractiveness, which meant that identifying as a geek meant willingly reclaiming the term in an act of rebellion against the mainstream culture or even societal standards at large. Claiming the geek

identity was likely an act of rebellion in itself before the terms ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ became a symbol of pride in one’s intelligence and interests, almost a “badge of honor” (Hannaford n.p.). For this reason, it is possible that the word still carries connotations of the past rebellious nature of this identity. In *TBBT*, there are several occasions when one of the male protagonists mentions being bullied as a child for not conforming to the traditional requirements of young boys’ masculinity – being athletic or at least interested in sports instead of comic books or sciences. The behavior of other children towards young geeks could result in the perception that the geek identity, whether related to comic books and games, or to scientific interests and achievements, is in itself rebellious and standing on the margins of the society. The whole show indeed perpetuates the stereotypical views of geeks as socially inept, incapable of easily finding a satisfying romantic or sexual relationship, and unable to relate to people outside of the limited geek community, which consists only of odd, unattractive men in their late twenties or early thirties. While this perception no longer corresponds with the reality of geek culture, the view of geek identities as rebelling against the mainstream culture or even society are still pervasive, and visible in shows such as *TBBT*. The characters that Sheldon idolizes and often mentions (as discussed in section 4.3) could all be characterized as rebellious to a certain extent, fighting against injustice and gaining respect for their deeds. Aside from being related to the creation of masculine identities, rebellion also factors into the creation of asexual masculinities specifically. Politicization and radicalization of asexuality, explored in section 1.2 above, gave rise to the notion of asexuality as a form of rebellion against the conservative, traditional views about human sexuality, i.e. that everyone has to be sexually attracted to someone (Chasin, “Reconsidering Asexuality” 410). This notion resulted in calls for asexuality as the tool to divorce the term ‘human’ from the term ‘sexual’ in order to “destabilize the sexual regime [...] that privileges sexual relationships against other affiliations” (Gressgard 188). However, Decker notes that asexuals themselves are not particularly fond of their identity being used as a political tool: asexual men might thus ignore the potential of connecting their asexual identity with any form of rebellion against the traditional societal norms. Claiming the identity of a rebel affords the respect and admiration from other men, but while it is possible to attain some respect or admiration from claiming a geek identity, at least from other men who identify as geeks, due to the low prevalence of asexuality and the low visibility of this orientation, it is unlikely that claiming asexual identity would result in gaining much in terms of respect from other

men. Considering the role of sexuality in the structuring of the hierarchy among men, it is even less likely that an openly claimed asexual identity, however subversive, would result in a greatly positive reaction towards the asexual man in the present times.

In conclusion, the fourth rule of masculinity, 'give 'em hell', contains several concepts that could prove both valid and problematic for the construction of asexual masculinities. While it is impossible to generalize Sheldon Cooper into an image of all, or even most, asexual men, due to the strong overlap of asexual masculinity with geek masculinity in this character, it becomes clear that even men who do not participate in any form of physical violence can potentially exhibit aggressive behavior in other, more benign forms. Competition plays a strong part in these displays and is indispensable in the creation of male identities. Sheldon himself participates in competition in various ways, such as video games, intellectual debates and arguments, or academic achievements. Humor also holds undeniable importance for the discussion of competition in the process of creating masculine identities: men often use it as a form of competition in itself, be it through witty remarks and teasing, or through practical jokes played on other men. The stereotypical view of asexuals as humorless is pervasive in *TBBT* and the character of Sheldon only serves to reassert these stereotypes, which could be problematic for asexual viewers in general and asexual men in particular. In addition, because sexuality plays a great role in the way men experience and exhibit humor, asexual men might be pressured to both consume and produce humor with which they might be uncomfortable.

The image of a rebel fighting against the established order of things could be potentially useful for asexuals, considering how asexuality has been explained as rebellion against heteronormative societal order and the sexualization of the society and culture. Nevertheless, many asexuals would not wish to equate their sexual identity with social politics so clearly, since the act of rebellion insinuates a conscious choice of behavior, and asexuals have been trying to eradicate the idea that asexuality is a choice instead of a sexual orientation.

CHAPTER 5

DEXTER

Together with *The Big Bang Theory (TBBT)*, another show that is often included in the debates on asexuality on television is the American crime drama *Dexter*. Based on a 2004 novel by Jeff Lindsay, it was developed for Showtime by James Manos, Jr., an American film and television producer and writer also known for *The Shield* (Fox Extended (FX), 2002-2008) or the first season of *The Sopranos* (Home Box Office (HBO), 1999-2007). Lindsay wrote eight *Dexter* novels in total¹⁰, but the series developed independently from the books after the first season. The pilot episode aired in 2006, with more than one million viewers. The audience grew steadily and the final season averaged 2.3 million viewers per episode, achieving the rating of 1.1 in the 18-49 demographic. Compared to *TBBT*, the size of *Dexter*'s audience might not appear substantial. However, it is necessary to take into account the networks on which the series were broadcasted. Showtime, which ran all eight seasons of *Dexter*, is a premium cable and satellite television network, which negatively affects the number of viewers to whom *Dexter* was primarily available in comparison to the *TBBT*'s free broadcast company, CBS. In fact, the pilot of *Dexter* garnered "highest series rating in nearly two years" (Mitovich n.p.) for Showtime. Two years later, due to the Hollywood writers' strike of 2007-2008, broadcast networks were forced to examine the possibility of airing re-runs of cable shows, and *Dexter* was among those that appeared on CBS, with minor edits regarding language and explicit violence (Szalai and Andreeva n.p.). Eventually, only the first season was aired and the number of viewers spanned from 6.6 to 8.1 million. While the numbers of *Dexter*'s viewership might be lower than that of *TBBT*, the program was still greatly successful and gained steady followers. In addition, its audience has slightly more male (55%) than female viewers, making the series a great source of analysis for the discussion of masculinities and potential asexual role models in contemporary television fiction ("Showtime's *Dexter* Becomes Hot Trending Topic" n.p.).

Dexter revolves around the title character, Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall), who witnessed the violent murder of his mother at age three and was subsequently

¹⁰ *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004); *Dearly Devoted Dexter* (2005); *Dexter in the Dark* (2007); *Dexter by Design* (2009); *Dexter is Delicious* (2010); *Double Dexter* (2011); *Dexter's Final Cut* (2013); *Dexter is Dead* (2015).

adopted by a policeman, Harry Morgan (James Remar). Dexter exhibited signs of homicidal, psychopathic traits since early childhood, and his father taught him to cope with these urges by using the murderous thoughts constructively – i.e. through killing only criminals who would have otherwise gone unpunished by the legal system (child molesters, serial killers, rapists, murderers of the innocent, etc.). Dexter works as a blood spatter analyst at the forensic department of Miami Metro Police, along with his sister, first an officer and later a detective, Debra Morgan (Jennifer Carpenter). Other noteworthy members of the department include Dexter's boss, María LaGuerta (Lauren Vélez) or detectives Angel Batista (David Zayas) and James Doakes (Erik King), as well as another forensic scientist, Vince Masuka (C.S. Lee). The style of the show differs from *TBBT* not only in genre, but also in the narrative technique which allows the audience to hear Dexter's private thoughts, both when he is committing murder and in everyday social and workplace situations. Thanks to the *off* narrative voice, it is possible to examine the character's inner psychological motivations much more closely than in the case of *TBBT*.

Despite the radical difference in genre, *Dexter* and *TBBT* share common denominators that make them suitable for a comparison. As a protagonist, Dexter exhibits several features indicative of asexuality and, much like Sheldon Cooper – discussed in the previous chapter – he struggles with a mental health affliction. While Sheldon's autism remains a speculation unconfirmed by the *TBBT* creators, Dexter's psychopathy is openly discussed in nearly every episode. By ascribing asexuality to characters with mental health issues, television shows actively support the stereotypical medicalization of asexuality. Sinwell comments that “rather than ‘queering’ asexuality by representing it in such a way as to depathologize it or destigmatize disability, [these shows] only reinscribe the boundaries between the perverse and the normal by writing them onto asexual bodies” (168).

Furthermore, Dexter, as a blood spatter analyst with scientific education and knowledge, could also be said to represent geek culture, although a slightly different aspect than the scientists of *TBBT*. His work hints at the shift in the perception of geeks in contemporary culture, i.e. the belief that intelligence, scientific knowledge and technological skill contribute to the creation of modern masculinities. As Beeler claims,

Dexter is part of a contemporary trend which idolizes the technical and scientific aspects of law enforcement. The *CSI* franchise, *Bones*, as well as the series *Numb3rs*, typify this shift in the heroes of American popular culture. The highly

skilled technicians and scientists that dominate this sub-genre are more likely to carry an identity card than a badge, and if they carry a gun, it is not a part of their official job description.

(223)

It is not only computer skills and theoretical science that provide the pillars for the creation of masculine identities, as it is in *TBBT*. Forensic scientists increasingly appear on television in the roles of heroes, i.e. as the ideals of modern masculinity. In addition, both *Dexter* and *TBBT* may appeal to a wide variety of audiences of similar age and gender distribution, despite the fact that *Dexter* aired on a premium network, while *TBBT* has been aired by a free broadcasting company.

Dexter's asexuality – and more importantly, whether the character can be deemed asexual – could be debated from several viewpoints, particularly in relation to the differences between the book version of the character and the way he is rendered in the show. Some fans have argued that while Dexter in the books could be easily labeled as asexual, the television character has been portrayed as merely repressed or traumatized with increasing frequency and intensity in the later seasons (“Asexual Character Spotlight”). However, there are several points to be made in favor of Dexter's asexuality on the screen. For instance, in the pilot episode, he thinks about dating and sexual encounters in very clear terms:

Every night is a date night in Miami, and everyone's having sex. But for me, sex never enters into it. I don't understand sex. Not that I have anything against women, and I certainly have an appropriate sensibility about men, but when it comes to the actual act of sex, it's always just seemed so... undignified. But I have to play the game.

(Manos Jr., 2006, 1.1¹¹)

For Dexter, sex is merely a game that he is forced to play in order to appear ordinary. His adoptive father, Harry, taught him how to blend in and keep up the appearance of normalcy. As discussed in Chapter 1, people “imprisoned in prescriptive ideas of the ‘normal’ share the pain of blocked options, broken connections, lost access to self-definition freely and powerfully assumed” (K. Rich 140). Dexter's need to be perceived as common imprisons him in a similar manner: his choices are influenced by the urge to blend in with other people, his connections appear superficial at the beginning of the

¹¹ For the sake of clarity and to avoid unnecessary repetitions, further references to the show include only the number of the season and the episode.

show, and his self-definition is based largely on the perception of others, predominantly his deceased father. In order for him to ‘pass’, it would be reasonable to maintain a romantic and sexual relationship. Yet, Dexter seems to exhibit an inherent dislike towards sexual activities. Despite performing many social interactions that he does not enjoy just to be seen as harmless, the protagonist makes an effort to avoid sexual encounters at the beginning of the first season.

It is also interesting to note that Dexter, in his thoughts, specifically clarifies that he does not dislike women and that he has “an appropriate sensibility about men” (1.1), which could be interpreted as the protagonist distancing himself from the possibility of homosexuality, explaining that his disinterest in sex does not stem from same-sex attraction. Nevertheless, his words remain vague enough that they could also be interpreted as Dexter failing to differentiate between men and women on the basis of sexual attraction, a view that many asexuals share. He does not pursue any homosexual relationships in the course of the show, even though that could be attributed to the fact that maintaining a heterosexual relationship would better serve his purpose of blending in and being perceived as normal, due to the homophobic sentiments present even in the 21st-century society, particularly in the law enforcement area.

Dexter’s attitude towards sex slowly changes throughout the series, but his sexual encounters are always characterized by certain common denominators. The first would be emotional connection: whenever he seeks sexual contact with a woman, it is either after developing a certain bond with her, or because he is in distress. Dexter seems to be more focused on finding this emotional bond and connection with another person than he is on finding a fulfilling sexual relationship. As he comments at the beginning of season 1: “Lately the thing that surprises me most about Rita is how much I like being with her. But whenever that happens with a woman, when I feel comfortable with her, it all goes wrong” (1.2). This would indicate that he has experienced similar feelings even before meeting Rita Bennett (Julie Benz), a woman that his sister saved from domestic violence. Dexter also thinks about the specific reason why his previous relationships have gone wrong when he reminisces about his teenage years and his father’s advice.

Dexter: Yeah, well, I don’t really care about girls.

Harry: Oh.

Dexter: I just like being alone.

Harry: But most normal people don't, and it's important that you seem normal.
 [...]
 Harry: Dexter, women are different from men.
 Dexter: We've had this talk, dad.
 Harry: I'm saying they have a whole different experience of things. When they're with someone, physically, they feel connected. And they know when you're not. They can sense it because you're very exposed. [...] I mean emotionally. Son, this is going to be very dangerous for you.
 Dexter: I can fake it.
 Harry: Buddy, you can learn to fake a lot of things. This is a tough one. (1.5)

Harry Morgan's words have influenced Dexter's thinking for decades to come: regarding sexuality, he has become convinced that it is necessary to maintain heterosexual relationships because, according to Harry, it would make him seem more ordinary. Furthermore, Harry expresses the belief that women can always sense the depth of emotional attachment during a sexual encounter, instilling the fear of being revealed as a psychopath in his son. This is further evidenced by Dexter's thoughts in adulthood: "every time I sleep with a woman she sees me for what I really am – empty. And then she's gone" (1.8). First of all, his distress over women leaving after a sexual encounter emphasizes his unwillingness to engage in intercourse merely for physical pleasure. For many men, meaningless sexual encounters would be not only acceptable, but desirable. Instead, Dexter appears to be upset about women who leave after having sex with him. While his claim of emptiness could refer to his lack of emotions, i.e. his psychopathic quality, this fear may also resonate within the asexual community, where many people have claimed that "sex did not help [them] to feel emotionally closer to their partner" (Van Houdenhove *et al.* 183). As one of the male interviewees in Przybylo's study states: "I wanted these other things in a relationship other than sex that are more important to me but after a while I felt like sex is the most important thing" ("Masculine Doubt" 231). The pressure to perform sexually in order to be perceived as masculine might negatively affect the ability of asexuals to emotionally connect. The performance of sexuality might have a negative impact on men. The fixation on the sexual part of a relationship might result in trouble with achieving emotional intimacy:

Men are misled by playboy images. They want intimacy but, as a 33-year-old professional man put it, 'I was taught to sexualize my desires for closeness or intimacy.' Playboy behavior grows out of insecurity. Being horny is related to anxiety. Lonely men conquer women sexually (or men if they are gay) because

they believe they will fulfill their needs for closeness by fucking another human being.

(Harris 104)

This sexualization of the desire for intimacy thus appears to be a problem for non-asexual men as well. Nonetheless, the perpetuation of this misconception potentially affects asexual men in more ways, due to the fact that they are performing sexual attraction they do not feel to not only establish intimacy with their romantic partners, but also to bond with other non-asexual men through dialogue about sexual conquests. Discussing how asexual and masculine identities overlap might thus provide insight into the negotiation of masculinities in general.

Furthermore, the insinuation of Dexter being afraid of sex resembles one of the stereotypes about asexual people: that they might have only had a bad experience with sex and thus are reluctant to repeat the unpleasant situation (Decker 100). Harry equating sex with emotional connection could also be why Dexter initiates, or agrees to, sexual activities when he feels the need to connect with another person. In either case, Dexter's engagement in sexual encounters mostly with women with which he shares a certain connection points towards a sexual orientation on the asexual spectrum. Dexter certainly fits the description of demisexuality or, as explored in section 2.1, an orientation characterized by a lack of sexual attraction to anyone unless the person forms a strong emotional connection with someone ("Demisexual" n.p.).

When he is not searching for – or attempting to maintain – a strong emotional bond, Dexter also uses sex as a way of furthering his schemes and plans, without showing signs of feeling sexual attraction to the woman in question. For example, he has sex with a classmate at his high school reunion in order to steal her phone (6.1), or with a girl at a truck stop because he wants to take her gun (6.7). In neither of these cases does he appear to be in any way attracted to the women. For him, sex is a way to achieve what he wants, whether it is acceptance and emotional connection, or simply obtaining an item crucial for his next kill.

The character at hand clearly fails to discern between platonic and sexual behavior on several occasions. In the first season, he accidentally harasses his girlfriend when he touches her in a way she interprets as a sexual advance, while he is only talking about a murderer. Johnson suggests that Dexter's touch to Rita's inner thigh is not sexual. Dexter is thinking of a murder case where the killer has used great skill to dismember the body, and his fascination is with the case and the criminal's technique,

not Rita's attractiveness: "Dexter's desires [...] are invested in the work itself and the artistic beauty of it. It is in this artistic beauty that Dexter finds pleasure. In essence then, as the artistic beauty is not concrete, cannot be physically touched, Dexter displaces his desire onto an actual visible object – Rita's thigh" (B. Johnson 81). Rita is clearly upset and flees from his car, saying that she is not ready; Dexter's reaction is mostly confusion and he thinks "What have I done now?" (1.1), indicating that he does not realize he has touched her in a way that could be interpreted as sexual. It becomes clear that the failure to correctly interpret and categorize behavior as sexual might result in interpersonal difficulties in the daily lives of asexual men.

Later in the same episode, Rita suggests that intercourse is a possibility for the future of their relationship, expressing her desire towards him. Dexter appears just as confused as he was in the car, although he eventually admits in his thoughts that "making out with Rita was... interesting" (1.1). The way Dexter describes their kiss suggests that he was not particularly moved by the experience, and his inner monologue continues with a warning to himself, indicative of his continued fear of exposure as a psychopath and thus, the end of their relationship in which he feels increasingly comfortable: "if I don't keep a lid on this, it could be the end of us" (1.1). He thinks about Rita as the right woman for him precisely because she is unwilling, even incapable, of initiating sexual encounters: due to the abuse she has suffered at the hands of her husband, she is too traumatized to express her sexuality. Dexter even explicitly thinks that "she's perfect because [she] is, in her own way, as damaged as me" (1.1). This indicates his reluctance to engage in sexual activity, as well as his thoughts on this part of himself as damaged, abnormal or unhealthy, a sentiment shared by many asexuals. Throughout the show, the protagonist is convinced of the necessity of a sexual and romantic relationship for meaningful, deep connection with another person, and the depiction of these relationships as a road to recovery regarding his psychopathy point towards the perceived importance of sex and its curative power in the modern society.

Dexter's disinterest in women as sexual objects is also made clear in the several instances where he is confronted with sex workers or striptease dancers. In season 3, his colleagues from the police department plan a bachelor party for him. Aside from the discussion where Vince Masuka states that hiring prostitutes would be a waste for a man like Dexter (3.10), the bachelor party itself proves that he is disinterested in the sight of naked women. Vince promises that the party includes "high-class adult entertainment" (3.11) and Dexter reacts with a visible effort not to grimace, thinking

“Kill me now” (3.11). At the same time, he feels obligated to pretend interest, because he tells his colleagues that the party they have planned is “awesome” (3.11), while very obviously uncomfortable and even bored with the program they have planned. Dexter thus performs masculinity in order to establish it: in Butler’s words, “gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. [...] [Gender] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (33). Even for asexual men, sexuality is depicted as one of the crucial constituents of a masculine identity. As explored in Chapter 1, asexual men often feel the need to perform heterosexuality in order to appear normal and to create or reinforce bonds with other men. For instance, in Przybylo’s study, an asexual interviewee observes that the culture pressures men to “perform sexually, like that’s the essence of manlihood” (“Masculine Doubt” 230), and this ‘essence’ is performed to create a masculine identity. If the expressions of a gender identity are indeed the constituents of this identity, heterosexuality becomes equated with masculinity. However, male asexual characters do not completely escape the comparison to gay men, despite the performance of heterosexuality. In season 7 of *Dexter*, the police department is handling a case involving a mob-related strip club. When Dexter arrives, he shows no interest in the dancers at all. The only men in the club who remain indifferent to the naked women are Dexter and a high-ranking criminal who is later revealed to be gay (7.3). Dexter’s disregard for this type of erotic entertainment further emphasizes his lack of sexual attraction towards women to whom he does not feel a deeper bond, comparing and linking his disinterest with that of a gay man.

The appeal of analyzing this protagonist in relation to asexuality lies in the scarcity of asexual characters in popular television shows. The analysis of the representation of potentially asexual characters can yield answers to the question of how asexual characters in general and male asexual characters in particular are portrayed on-screen, and how that representation relates to the creation of male asexual identities on the basis of these television role models. Furthermore, *Dexter* allows for the discussion of the stereotypes related to asexuality. In this respect, in an article by an asexual member of *Dexter*’s audience, the stereotypes are summed up as follows:

since Dexter is a mostly emotionless, sociopath serial killer, do we really want people to associate him with asexuality? Well... yes and no. Obviously there’s potential to perpetuate certain stereotypes, most notably: 1) that asexuals are

repressed and probably all have traumatic pasts, and 2) that [asexuals are] incapable of love.

(“Asexual Character Spotlight” n.p.)

The author claims that Dexter, despite his apparent issues as an emotionless psychopath, is also a charming man who forces the audience to sympathize with him, and for this reason, discussing him as a representative of asexuality can hold great value for a minority that is often underrepresented, dehumanized, or perceived as unhealthy.

The following sections aim to analyze the creation of asexual masculinities with the same theoretical framework and method applied to *TBBT*, providing points of comparison between the two shows. On the character of Dexter Morgan, masculinities are discussed through the lens of Kimmel’s four basic rules of traditional masculinity, as presented in section 2.2 and applied to the corpus in Chapter 4. The analysis of *Dexter* also explores the potential of asexual and masculine identities to either overlap or to work in opposition to each other.

5.1 ‘No Sissy Stuff’

The first rule of masculinity to be analyzed in relation to *Dexter* is the one that dictates men to strive for a marked distinction from women, i.e. from everything that could be perceived as feminine and, by extension, weak. Men reinforce this distinction through several processes and thought patterns, such as homophobia, sexism or misogyny, and physical demonstrations of difference from femininity. They exaggerate the traits traditionally coded as masculine to create a marked difference from the feminine. As presented in Chapter 2, masculinity has become a continuous, never-ending test to some men, “demanding that it be proved in increasingly physical demonstration” (Kimmel, *The History* xi). These demonstrations include far more than the performance of strength. Kimmel summarizes the basic tenets in following manner: “Never dress that way. Never talk or walk that way. Never show your feelings or get emotional. Always be prepared to demonstrate sexual interest in women that you meet, so it is impossible for any woman to get the wrong idea about you” (Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia” 148). Considering that sexual interest and its outward manifestations constitute an important part of performing masculinities and creating male identities (Przybylo, “Masculine Doubt” 230), it is productive to examine asexual characters such as Dexter in order to determine how masculinities are constructed without sexual

interest, and whether or not men are perceived unfavorably when they fail to perform this interest adequately.

Without the overt displays of heterosexuality, it is first necessary to examine whether homophobia comes into question with asexual characters. As seen in Chapter 2, homophobia cannot be merely viewed as a dislike of men attracted to other men. It is inherently a power relation rooted in the fear of emasculation. Kimmel explains homophobia as “the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men” (“Masculinity as Homophobia” 147). For this reason, men can face homophobic language if they fail to perform their masculinity in a way other men perceive as satisfactorily distinct from femininity, or if they do not display enough sexual interest in women. As a result, asexual men might either adopt homophobic behavior, or become a target of such abuse.

In section 4.1, it was revealed that Sheldon from *TBBT* occasionally engages in homophobic remarks or jokes aimed at his male friends. In the show at hand, Dexter does not use similar forms of communication with his male colleagues or acquaintances, and never resorts to homophobic language, not even with his victims. In fact, he does not have a problem performing homosexuality for the sake of a kill. While his usual targets are men who have harmed or murdered women or children, Dexter also deals with a murderer who targets homosexual men. The protagonist’s strategy in this case is to pretend to be gay on an Internet website, claiming that he is looking for casual sex in order to lure the murderer. Dexter does not remark on the homosexuality of his target or the man’s victims in any way: “Soon, Lance Robinson will be on my table. Lance trolls the Internet, engaging in casual encounters with innocent men, who never suspect those encounters could turn deadly. Four times Lance deliberately pushed someone’s fantasies too far” (5.6). The only matter of importance to Dexter is that the man kills innocent people. He also later takes advantage of the figure of Lance Robinson (Chad Allen) as a cover for another murder, arranging the two bodies so that it appears to the police as if they had engaged in non-conventional sex. Together with his ability to pretend to be gay, Dexter uses the performance of homosexuality the same way that he uses heterosexual behavior: as a means to an end. Furthermore, in season 7, he meets another gay man, a Ukrainian criminal named Isaak Sirko (Ray Stevenson). Dexter kills Isaak’s lover and the criminal attempts to get revenge by murdering Dexter. However, they eventually have a civil discussion when Dexter follows Isaak into a bar. At first, the protagonist fails to notice that the establishment caters primarily to homosexual men,

but upon realizing where he is, he does not act offended and makes no effort to mark himself as different from the people around him. Instead, he sits with Isaak and talks to him, at first assuming that Isaak thought Dexter would not follow him into a gay bar. When Isaak reveals that he is gay and the man Dexter murdered was his partner, Dexter displays surprise, but not offense or discomfort. Isaak then discusses the similarities he feels between himself and Dexter: “We’re outsiders, you and I. On the periphery. Watching everybody else. Pretending we’re just like them, but knowing we’re not. Best we can hope for is to find a place where we don’t have to pretend” (7.8). These words point towards the inherent similarities between gay and asexual men as belonging to a group of subordinate masculinities, performing heterosexuality in order to be accepted. As explained in Chapter 1, both asexual and homosexual men might face discrimination based on the social policing of gender, which is “often theorized as punitive sanctions against violations of both heteronormative masculinity [...] and heteronormative femininity” (Chasin, “Making Sense” 4-5). Dexter does not attempt to refute Isaak’s claims of similarity between them in any way, and Isaak is one of the few characters on the show with whom Dexter discusses questions of love and relationships. The two men even seem to respect each other, and Dexter later helps protect the criminal from two assassins sent to kill him. When Isaak is shot, Dexter grants him his wish of being buried in the same place as his lover, i.e. thrown into the ocean in the same spot where Dexter disposed of Viktor’s body (7.9).

Homophobia is not the only tool used to distance oneself from femininity. Sexism and misogyny are frequently utilized with a similar outcome in mind. Dexter occasionally engages in sexist humor and conversation to bond with colleagues or other acquaintances, i.e. to establish male friendships. The two men who are consistently shown to have a friendly relationship with Dexter are his colleagues from the police department, Angel Batista and Vincent Masuka. While James Doakes embodies the traditional ideal of masculinity in all the four basic rules, Angel and Vince are both perceived as less masculine because of some of their traits. For instance, Vince is frequently shown to be seen by others as a strange geek, and he also behaves submissively around Doakes; Angel Batista often talks about emotions and wears floral shirts, none of which is coded as traditionally masculine, particularly in comparison to Doakes’ aggressive, physically powerful masculinity. Dexter’s friendship with Vince is based on tolerating Vince’s sexually motivated remarks: for example, when Dexter brings a blood sample to be tested, Vince asks if it is to screen for a sexually transmitted

disease (5.9). Vince is also responsible for inviting strippers to Dexter's bachelor party (3.10), and the other members of the police department frequently comment on Vince's extreme, and sometimes inappropriate, presentation of his sexuality. Dexter himself never verbally expresses discomfort with Vince's sexually charged comment, and often simply nods his head or offers a forced smile in reaction to Vince's humor. Dexter's reactions adhere to the stereotypical assumption that asexual people are either incapable of understanding sexual humor or feel uncomfortable when encountering it. According to Decker, this stereotype is generally untrue and "it's unlikely that casual mentions of sex will disgust [most asexuals]. [...] Taking it for granted that asexual people would be horrified [...] may seem condescending" (126). His inability to refuse participation in sexually themed humor brings into focus the way men perceive their friendships as more than emotional bonds. As seen in section 4.3, friendships men establish also become sources for validation of each other's masculinity: "[a] male friend – particularly one who is not a target of bullying, but one who seems to be successful at masculinity – can stand in for an entire peer culture and validate a guy's sense of himself as a man" (Kimmel, *Guyland* 278-279). Dexter's willingness to alter his self-perception based on some of the friendships he develops, e.g. with Miguel Prado (Jimmy Smits), suggests that asexual men also seek validation through friendships with other men.

This search for validation is also present in the form in which Dexter uses sexuality to bond with his male colleagues, Vince and Angel. When he dates Lila West (Jaime Murray), both Angel and Vince seem to approve of her and comment to Dexter that "she's pretty hot" (2.8). The protagonist, again, reacts with mild discomfort, and his eventual agreement with Angel suggests that he only says it out loud because Angel apparently expects it. In season 7, a similar situation appears when Vince asks Dexter who is texting him and it is revealed that Dexter has another girlfriend, Hannah McKay (Yvonne Strahovski). Vince even demands a high-five from Dexter for dating her, and asks for pictures:

Vince: Who's sending you hugs and kisses?

Dexter: No one.

Vince: Bullshit. That was a girl. Was she sexting you? You got pictures? Come on, I gotta restock my spank bank. Hey, Angel, do you know anything about Dexter's new girlfriend?

Angel: Who, Hannah McKay?

[...]

Vince: Ahh, my man.

[...]

Angel: I get it. Hannah is an attractive girl. But you should probably be careful.

Vince: Yeah, you – you should definitely be careful of getting burned because she’s so freaking hot.

(7.10)

Dexter does not react with enthusiastic agreement about Hannah’s attractiveness, which corresponds with one of the possible expressions of asexuality, i.e. discomfort with conversations about people’s physical appeal (Decker 139). Dexter does not use his current girlfriend’s – or wife’s – attractiveness as proof of his personal success, i.e. boasting about having a good-looking woman in his life, which insinuates that similarly to Sheldon in *TBBT*, he does not perceive physical appearance as overly important. Nonetheless, dating an attractive woman provides him with approval of other men, and he is described as masculine, e.g. as “pure jungle cat” (4.8).

As Hodson and MacInnis explain, humor is an essential part of male interactions not only for its potential to bring into focus the perceived failure to adhere to the standards of masculinity, but also because it can be used

to lighten the severity of any purported offense by the communicator. Humor and joke-telling are frequently dismissed as just jokes, with the implication being that those not appreciating the joke are unintelligent (i.e., failure to “get” the joke or appreciate the context), killjoys (i.e., insistence on prudish seriousness), or severely at odds with societal norms and strategies for bonding (i.e., being less human).

(63)

According to some theorists, one of the most important bases for humor is sexuality. Bogaert has discussed this connection, exploring the building and releasing of tension common both to sexual activities as well as creation and reception of humor and jokes (“Understanding Asexuality” 135-137). He wonders whether asexuals might be able to understand sexual humor and be amused by it, and to what extent. In Dexter’s case, sexual humor does not seem to amuse him, even though he performs interest in order to bond, predominantly with other men. For instance, when Angel and Vince joke in front of Dexter about a sexual position, Dexter outwardly smiles, but thinks about how he must be missing an “essential piece of the human puzzle” (1.3). Dexter’s own attempts at humor are often misunderstood, e.g. when a neighbor pushes Cody into the pool and Dexter does the same with Astor (4.3). Dexter does not understand why she is upset, or why the other neighbors are not laughing the same way they did when Cody was

pushed. Dexter's grasp on humor is revealed as rather weak, reinforcing the stereotype that asexuals must be humorless, as well as the idea that asexuals might be forced to perform heterosexuality to fit into the society.

The stereotypical view of asexuals as inhuman might be reinforced by the fact that humor is often understood to be one of the basic factors of being human, and thus if asexuals fail to comprehend humor, which, in many cases, is based on sexual activity, knowledge or interest, they are perceived as less human for it. Humor also serves the purpose of establishing intra- and inter-group relationships and boundaries:

when a hearer laughs in response to a speaker's humorous utterance, they signify that they [...] share the speaker's attitude [...]. The humor contributes to a sense of solidarity, reinforcing the notion that they belong to the same group. [...] When humor is targeted at an out-group, it further creates a division between 'us' and 'them'.

(Hui 194)

Consequently, Dexter seems aware that if he fails to be amused by the sexually-themed jokes of others, or when his own attempts at humor are not recognized as amusing, he is established as the out-group, the outsider who does not share certain values, opinions and interests and thus might be treated as odd among his group of friends. For this reason, he performs amusement in order to maintain the appearance of normalcy, revealing the issues asexual men might face in their workplace or friendly relationships.

Dexter might not use sexist or misogynistic remarks to differentiate himself from women, but he does not disagree explicitly with men in his life who expect him to react favorably to such remarks. This behavior can be explained as Dexter deliberately acting in a way that will result in the approval of other men, seeing as men predominantly conform to these rules of masculinity to gain such positive evaluation (Kimmel, *Guyland*'47). Dexter befriends Miguel Prado, a Cuban lawyer who performs the 'no sissy stuff' rule through remarks aimed at accentuating the difference from women. When their wives talk about ordering a massage, Miguel does not deem the activity suitable for men and seeks affirmation from Dexter:

Miguel: All of that stuff, that's not for men, right, Dex?

Dexter: Lying naked on a table, helpless, no thanks.

(3.5)

Dexter uses inherently dark humor, taking into account his secret homicidal activities, to agree with Miguel without truly doing it: Dexter's idea of lying on a table helpless is

markedly different from what the lawyer meant, due to his preferred way of killing his victims while they are bound and lying on a flat surface, e.g. a table. In another instance, Dexter attends a neighborhood watch meeting, where the other men from the neighborhood seek agreement from him in a similar manner to Miguel's remark: "We can't let them steal our women, huh?" To which Dexter replies: "No, they're our women" (4.3). He clearly does not know how to react to the possessive remark about the ownership of women, but once again, he agrees in order to blend in and remain inconspicuous. Through his uncomfortable facial expressions in these instances, it becomes clear that Dexter neither understands the conversations connected to male bonding, nor needs to markedly set himself apart from women and femininity. However, the performance of these masculine behaviors allows him to blend in and establish friendly bonds that help him keep his cover. Asexual men thus might use sexually themed humor or sexist conversation for the same purpose as Dexter: to gain positive evaluation from and establish friendships with other men, or to maintain the cover of normalcy. This willingness to overlook misogyny or sexism potentially places asexual masculinities into the category of complicity, as discussed in section 2.2. Connell explains complicity as the fact that most men gain some advantages from the overall subordination of women, even if they do not actively embody or practice the patterns of hegemonic masculinity, and thus are complicit to the general hegemonic project (79). Complicit masculinity allows for compromises with women in both private and professional areas, and many men belonging to this category might even "respect their wives and mothers [and] are never violent towards women" (Connell 79). This is the case for Dexter, who does not appear to strive for dominance over the women in his life. Yet, through failing to voice disapproval of the sexist remarks of others, he gains an advantage from the overall perception of women as subordinate by other men. As Przybylo explains, participation in sexual activities and conversation about them among male friends is "a marker of fitting in with peers, belonging, and coming of age" ("Masculine Doubt" 229). Asexual men are likely to experience the pressure to participate in these activities and conversations in order to establish valuable friendships with other men.

The 'no sissy stuff' rule of masculinity can also be expressed through a man's behavior towards women. While Sheldon in *TBBT* often uses derogatory comments about women's intelligence or capabilities, and is presented as markedly misogynistic in his beliefs, Dexter does not treat women as inferior. The single exception could be his

protective behavior towards women in general, which also extends to children and young people. As hinted above, his victims are often men who have abused or murdered women. According to the US Department of Justice, 89.5% of all homicides in the US between 1980 and 2008 were committed by men (Cooper and Smith 10). Among more than sixty premeditated murders with known victims which Dexter commits or mentions on the show, there are only six women, which roughly corresponds with the statistical difference between male and female homicide offenders. This creates the impression that Dexter's choice of victims simply reflects the statistics of homicides in the United States. However, only 23.2% of all homicide victims, and only 20.8% of felony murder victims, were female (Cooper and Smith 10). When looking at the statistics of Dexter's kills, the number is significantly higher. Out of the 48 cases where it is possible to determine whether Dexter's victims were killers of men, women or both, 18 (37.5%) were focused on abuse, assault or murder of women. The numbers are even higher when taking into account victims who have assaulted, abused or murdered both men and women: approximately 20 out of the 48 known cases, i.e. nearly 42%. Only 7 (14.5%) of Dexter's victims killed or assaulted only men, two out of which focused on male children and elderly males, respectively. These numbers show that he is deliberately presented as a protector of women, "moving beyond the law and into the underworld, where the police cannot or will not go" (Peirse 192). In addition, he appears fascinated by this role. After the bodies of his victims are discovered and the police department is looking for the killer, Dexter works on a comic book store homicide and discovers that the store owner created a character named the Dark Defender, based on his deeds (2.5). Dexter then has a dream about saving his mother in the costume of the Dark Defender, confirming that this role constitutes a significant part of his identity.

This behavior also translates to the way Dexter treats the women who are close to him. In season 1, he is willing to kill his biological brother, Brian Moser (Christian Camargo), "[for] the safety of [his] sister" (1.12). Previously, Dexter was willing to consider Brian as an accomplice, or someone with whom he could form a close emotional bond due to their shared homicidal tendencies. However, Debra is one of the most important women in Dexter's life, if not the most important one, and her safety comes first in Dexter's mind. He refuses her request to kill someone, after she finds out about his being a murderer:

Dexter: Ever since you found out, you've been teetering on the edge. You've covered up evidence, you've lied –

Debra: For you!

Dexter: Yeah, that's why I can't let you take it any further. For your own good.

Deb: For my own – [...] please do not parent me, Dexter. You sound like dad.

Dex: Because that's probably what he'd say. [...] Deb, I care about you too much to let you do something you're gonna regret.

(7.8)

It is apparent from this dialogue that Debra is not content to simply wait and let Dexter protect her: she lies and commits crimes for his sake, and she is unhappy when he wants to exclude her from a part of his life, supposedly for her own good. Nevertheless, the decision appears to be Dexter's eventually, a fact that makes Debra visibly upset. He does not allow her the freedom of choice in this matter. She is passively demanding that he take action instead of acting on her own, and Dexter denies her request, claiming to know who she is. Dexter's protectiveness could stem from a strong emotional bond he shares with his sister, but it could also be perceived as mild misogyny, or prejudice against Debra as being unable to take care of herself, despite the fact that she has proven herself more than capable in that regard previously.

Apart from Debra, Dexter also behaves similarly towards other important women in his life. In the first season, Rita's abusive ex-husband assaults her in her home, and Dexter's protectiveness drives him to seek revenge and dispose of Rita's ex-husband before he can hurt her or her children. It is one of the first instances where Dexter's inner monologue points at him doubting his adoptive father's code, i.e. the rule of not killing an innocent man: "All I need is a little proof of his inner-monster. Harry would've insisted on that. Harry didn't believe in preemptive killing but maybe I can bend the rules just this once" (1.10). In the end, Dexter frames Rita's former spouse to have him sent back to prison, but his motivation is clearly to shield her and her children from abuse. At the same time, he is discovering the truth about his birthmother, Laura Moser (Katherine Kirkpatrick), who bears a striking resemblance to Rita. As Johnson suggests,

like Dexter's mother, Rita requires saving from male violence and terror; like Rita, Laura was mother to two young children and was desperate to protect them, giving her life in order that they should be saved. [...] Like Rita's husband Paul, Laura's husband, Joseph Driscoll (Dexter's biological father) was an addict.

(B. Johnson 83-84)

This could indicate that Dexter, in protecting Rita, is attempting to assuage his subconscious feelings about the death of his mother. He is not only defending his girlfriend, but also a mother, as his own was not defended when she should have been.

Protecting a motherly figure is a theme that *Dexter* repeats in season 8 with the character of Dr. Evelyn Vogel (Charlotte Rampling), the psychiatrist who is revealed to have been behind the creation of Harry's code, the set of moral rules that Dexter follows in order not to get caught:

Vogel: I know almost everything about you, Dexter. Not just because I heard it from your father, but because I helped create you. [...] It was me who convinced Harry that your urges couldn't be stopped, but they could be focused. [...]

Dexter: You're saying you came up with the code? [...]

Vogel: I can't help but think of myself as your spiritual mother. [...]

Dexter: You experimented on me. That's what mothers do?

Vogel: I developed a framework for your survival. That's what mothers do.

(8.2)

Dexter becomes fiercely protective of Dr. Vogel, and it is likely that he subconsciously agrees with her assessment of herself as a spiritual mother to him. When her biological son is revealed to be the killer who is sending her parts of human brains, Dexter plans to murder him despite her vocal disapproval. Once again, his wish to save her drives him to disregard the wishes of the woman he is protecting, as he had done with Debra previously. In relation to mother figures, Harris explains that "women influence the formation of a man's gender identity. Mothers teach their sons about masculinity by telling their sons how to behave, modeling certain behaviors, and rewarding sons for their actions" (28). While Dr. Vogel has not influenced Dexter directly by interacting with him on regular basis in his childhood, the importance of her role in Dexter's life becomes apparent in the revelation of her involvement with the creation of the code. Through these rules, she has certainly modeled Dexter's behavior from the invisible position of a spiritual mother, and defending her might once again be connected to Dexter's subconscious attempt to deal with his biological mother's murder. Protectiveness appears to be a large part of his relationships with women, whether platonic, motherly or romantic, unlike Sheldon from *TBBT*, who does not exhibit this type of behavior towards the females in his life.

In his relationship with women, Dexter behaves markedly different from Sheldon in another important aspect. In Kegan Gardiner's collection of essays, Thomas

states that “most heterosexual men are so concerned with the maintenance of their sovereign selfhood that they cannot tolerate its infringement by another. They seek instead to be always the destroyer, to refigure women in their own interests but to resist such refiguration themselves” (Kegan Gardiner 73). Where Sheldon performs this systematic refiguration of his girlfriend Amy by ignoring her wishes, hopes and dreams in favor of pursuing his own interests, Dexter does the exact opposite with most of his partners. He seeks acceptance and a semblance of a normal life, partly to maintain his cover, partly because he wishes for an emotional bond. With Rita, he attempts to adopt the role of husband and father, even though he internally struggles with both and fears that he is incompatible with these functions. On several occasions, he thinks that his family would “all be better off without [him]” (5.1). With Lila and Hannah, he seeks acceptance and understanding of who he is – especially with Hannah, he appears to reconsider his own identity, despite the fact that “she accepts both sides of [him]. The whole Dexter” (7.7). When Hannah expresses disbelief about the existence of a second persona in his mind, the Dark Passenger, Dexter rethinks the idea he has held for decades and eventually agrees with her that the Dark Passenger does not exist (7.10). In this, it becomes clear that he attempts to refigure his own identity: in the last season, Dexter explicitly states that without Hannah, he does not know who he is anymore (8.1).

The only relationship in which Dexter attempts to change the woman with whom he is involved is the one that he develops with Lumen Pierce (Julia Stiles) in season 5. Despite his initial refusal to do so, Dexter teaches Lumen how to kill when she expresses the wish to avenge herself and murder her rapists, and he comments that after they have murdered together, “she’s starting to sound like [Dexter]” (5.7). However, even in the relationship where Dexter teaches the woman how to be like him, he does not do so by force. When Lumen wants to leave, after they eliminate the last of the men who assaulted her, Dexter lets her go. Ultimately, his motivation for teaching Lumen is revealed to be his wish for emotional connection, and by proxy, for a change in himself: “Can anyone live with the truth of what I am? Is Lumen what will make me whole?” (5.8). Before she leaves, Dexter clearly states that the change he perceives in himself is induced by her perception of him: “With Lumen, I’m someone different. In her eyes, I’m not a monster at all” (5.10). As with all his relationships, the person that Dexter ultimately seeks to refigure is himself, which displays marked difference from most heterosexual men as described by Kegan Gardiner (73). His ability to know himself only through his romantic and sexual partner brings into focus the belief that in

the contemporary society, “sex becomes configured in the sexual imperative as synonymous with the self, so that to know who we are, we must know who we are sexually” (Przybylo, “Masculine Doubt” 229).

As we have seen, Sheldon in *TBBT* also uses women to validate his masculinity, predominantly his girlfriend Amy, who is often shown admiring him, especially when his behavior can be read as traditionally masculine. According to Pleck, in traditional masculinity it is required that women play their prescribed role of validating men’s masculine identity by “doing the things that make men feel masculine [...] when women refuse to exercise their masculinity validating power for men, many men feel lost and bereft and frantically attempt to force women back into their accustomed role” (60). Interestingly, for Dexter, this role is most notably filled by his sister instead of his romantic or sexual partners. Through the role of a boyfriend, husband and father, Dexter gains some degree of traditional masculinity. But his relationship with Debra seems to be a constant in the validation of his masculine identity. Dr. Vogel remarks on this phenomenon in season 8:

Vogel: Deb looks up to you. Isn’t that what you said?

Dexter: She used to.

Vogel: And that made you feel good about yourself?

Dexter: Yes.

Vogel: Well, no wonder you feel so lost. Debra became a mirror, reflecting a positive image of yourself that you used to balance out with the notion of yourself as a monster. Now that mirror is cracked, and the only reflection you see is one of darkness. [...] you’re a part of the natural order of things, with purpose, and value. A right to exist. And when you come to accept that, you’ll no longer be dependent on Debra, or anyone’s, validation.

(8.4)

Debra performs the validating role for Dexter’s masculinity by relying heavily on his assistance, frequently remarking that she needs him to support her and that she does not have anyone else to whom she could turn. When she attempts to diverge from the role familiar to him, he forces her back into it, enacting the factor of traditional masculinity that does not allow women to step out of their prescribed functions, even though the role Debra plays in Dexter’s life is not that of a romantic or sexual partner. It is also notable that Dexter’s validation comes for the most part out of a relationship which is neither romantic nor sexual, hinting that asexual men might draw acknowledgment from non-sexual relationships.

As was the case with Sheldon, Dexter's departure from the ideals of traditional masculinity is rooted more in dehumanization than feminization, closely resembling the struggle of asexuals with their portrayal in the media (see Chapter 3). Asexuals have been described as vaguely less human ("No Sex Please" n.p.) or likened to robots (Porter n.p.), moss or tadpoles (Tucker n.p.), aliens, and monsters (Hills n.p.). Sheldon in *TBBT* is frequently mocked for being robotic, inhuman or child-like. This dehumanization is realized in *Dexter* through the inner monologue of the protagonist. The motive of inhumanity spans through all eight seasons where the protagonist is visibly struggling with the image of himself as a monster. His dehumanization stems predominantly from his self-perception, as opposed to Sheldon, who appears to see himself as normal and everyone else as odd. Dexter is often reflecting on his thoughts, emotions and actions and through the imagined figure of his father, debates the idea of himself as something removed from humanity. For instance, after he saves Astor's friend from her abusive stepfather, Dexter imagines the following dialogue with Harry:

Dexter: I don't want to hear it, okay? 'This isn't your business, Dexter. Don't get involved, Dexter. You put too much at risk, Dexter.'

Harry: That's not what I was gonna say. I'm proud of you.

Dexter: You are?

Harry: You protected Astor, put yourself out there for another person. I had no idea you had that in you. I underestimated you. Assumed you were a monster when you were capable of so much more. If only I'd seen that, maybe I wouldn't have led you down this path.

(5.9)

Dexter's protectiveness of the women in his life – and later on, children – could be perceived as a struggle against inhumanity and a wish to be more than the monster he believes himself to be. It is significant to note that Dexter's doubts about his own capabilities, and most of all, his doubts about his humanity, are personified in the imagined figure of Harry, showing that Dexter seeks paternal approval even after his father's death: "since Harry is dead, Dexter must resurrect him in his mind, so that he, like Frankenstein's monster, can continue the conflict and wrestle with the Oedipal demons released by his final memories of Harry and his subsequent suicide" (Howard 71).

Dexter's constant struggle with the identity of a monster can also be read as a battle with masculinity. Kimmel explains that masculinity in general, and the four rules of masculinity in particular, are reinforced and policed by other men. When he asked

young men where they obtained the ideas about masculinity that could be summarized in the four rules, the responses consistently pointed towards male role models:

Guys hear the voices of the men in their lives – fathers, coaches, brothers, grandfathers, uncles, priests – to inform their ideas of masculinity. [...] men subscribe to these ideals not because they want to impress women, let alone any inner drive or desire to test themselves against some abstract standards. They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men.

(Guyland 47)

The significant male role model present in Dexter's life through his childhood, adolescence and young adulthood is his father Harry, who teaches Dexter a certain code of conduct pertaining to Dexter's homicidal urges. The first rule of the code is "don't get caught" and all the other rules exist for the sole reason of fulfilling the former (2.9; 3.1; 5.4). While Harry is talking about Dexter's killing when they discuss the code, the first rule holds resemblance to various factors of masculine identity that can be summarized as 'don't get caught' being less than masculine. Just as Dexter has to be careful about his conduct in order not to be revealed as a killer, men have to constantly perform in a similar way, due to the fear that "other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men" (Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia" 147). Dexter strives throughout his whole life not to be revealed as well, a struggle resembling that of asexual people who do not want to be revealed as such for fear of discrimination or misunderstanding.

Dexter's inner monologue about his monstrosity also reveals another factor of self-identification relevant to the discussion of asexual masculinities. He keeps regressing to thoughts about what Harry would have wanted him to do, implying that men constantly evaluate the potential approval of their behavior by other men, particularly older male role models, such as fathers. This incessant re-evaluation and policing of male behavior can be harnessed in a productive – or destructive – way, depending on how the father in question accesses that potential. Kimmel explores this through an example of the parents of high school boys who sexually assaulted several girls in order to win in the competition about who has the largest number of sexual partners. While the mothers responded with shock and worry, fathers almost displayed pride in their sons' predatory behavior. This reaction can reinforce violent behavior and prevent men from constructing a healthy and viable masculine identity for the contemporary society:

When a father connects with his son's sense of entitlement he becomes less of an ally to his son becoming a man. The father may have a momentary regression to Guyland himself, but he sacrifices his ability to help his son enter manhood. He [...] becomes the parent who holds [his son] back.

(Kimmel, *Guyland* 277)

Harry becomes complicit in Dexter's entitlement, not in regard to sexual predation, but in his refusal to believe that his homicidal urges can be contained. Instead, he teaches Dexter how to channel his violent behavior, and directs him towards other 'monsters'. The parallel between a masculine identity and Dexter's identity as a monster becomes noteworthy in the way Dexter chooses his victims. The brief statistics of Dexter's victims shows that a large majority of Dexter's homicides have had men as targets – predominantly men who have abused or murdered female victims. Through this choice, Dexter both enacts the masculinity Harry that taught him in adhering to the code and struggles against it by targeting men who embody violent misogyny as a factor of masculinity. Season 1 already portrays this inner struggle when Dexter claims to be the monster Harry told him he had to be, and later re-evaluates himself as “something new entirely, with [his] own set of rules” (1.4). Furthermore, it is not only Dexter's homicidal inclinations that come into question when discussing his adoptive father's influence on his life. Harry's teachings about killing are also likened to parental talk about sex: “realizing that the young boy has been killing animals [...], Harry is quick to confront Dexter and ask him about his 'urges' (1.1), a conversation that he compares, in Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, to the parental 'talk about sex dreams'” (Howard 63). This links Dexter's monstrosity to the perceived inhumanity of asexual people. In this regard, the difficulties that he has with adhering to Harry's rules reveal the problems young asexual men might have when attempting to construct their masculine identities by identifying with a non-asexual father.

Dexter continues to doubt the foundations of masculinity provided by Harry, nonetheless, he cannot fully separate himself from the thoughts about what his father, his greatest male role model, would think about his actions. Instead of simply thinking about who he is, he needs to imagine Harry telling him that he is proud (5.9). This reliance on his image as a monster is further questioned by Dr. Vogel in season 8, when she makes Dexter doubt whether the idea of himself to which he adhered is real or not. According to Kimmel, “the father is the first man who evaluates the boy's masculine performance, the first pair of male eyes before whom he tries to prove himself. Those

eyes will follow him for the rest of his life” (*The Gender* 34). Harry’s eyes do shape Dexter’s actions to a great extent, but it is significant to note that in with the appearance of Dr. Vogel in season 8, it is revealed that she has been behind the creation of the formative rules Dexter has known as Harry’s code (8.2).

Aside from Harry’s remembered or imagined words about Dexter as a monster, there are few instances of other characters verbally dehumanizing Dexter or describing him as inhuman or childish. Sergeant Doakes often calls Dexter names such as psycho, weirdo or freak (1.1; 1.5), but Dexter’s friends rarely comment in a similar manner. One such instance happens before Dexter’s bachelor party, when Angel forbids Vince from ordering prostitutes for the party and Vince replies with: “Come on. I was just joking. The party’s for Opie out there. A hooker is a terrible thing to waste” (3.10). The nickname Opie most likely refers to a character from *The Andy Griffith Show*, an American television program that was broadcasted on CBS in years 1960-1968. Opie Taylor was a character of a young boy, six years old when he first appeared on the show. This reference suggests that Dexter’s disinterest in sexual humor and activity might cause his coworkers to perceive him as a small child. However, Dexter deliberately performs heterosexual interest and dates women to blend in, which makes instances such as Vince’s comment rare on the show.

The ‘no sissy stuff’ rule also describes the way a man handles emotions as crucial to the division between masculinity and femininity. Kimmel states that a significant part of performing masculinity is to “never show your feelings or get emotional” (“Masculinity as Homophobia” 148), and this performance coincides with one of the most prevalent stereotypes about asexuality, i.e. that asexuals are emotionless (see section 4.3 above). Dexter both adheres to and disregards this unspoken rule throughout the show. As a psychopath, confirmed both by his own thoughts and the professional opinion of Dr. Vogel, Dexter does not feel emotions the way most people would, which contributes to his dehumanization. He himself frequently mentions his lack of emotions. For example, talking to Lila in season 2, he describes the feelings of a psychopath:

You’re emotionally color-blind. You use the right words, you pantomime the right behavior, but feelings never come to pass. [...] You know the dictionary definition of emotions, Longing, joy, sorrow... You have no idea of what any of those things actually feel like. [...] You know all the words but you can’t hear the music. [...] I’m just like you.

(2.12)

Dexter's incapability to feel or express emotions gradually changes in the later seasons. After his wife, Rita, is murdered, Dexter feels guilty for not having given her what she deserved, i.e. a husband who loved her:

I've watched 67 people die. And at the moment of truth, I looked into their eyes and they knew and I knew they got what they deserved. But what if that's not what happens? If you don't get what you deserve? If what you deserve is a white picket fence and your kids all around and a husband who loves you? What if the least you deserve is a real human being and what you get instead is me?

(5.1)

Once again, he sees himself as less than a real human being. He firmly believes he could not have loved Rita the way she deserved, but her death brings out an emotional response. He attempts to flee the country, and on his way he meets a rude man in a public restroom that makes disrespectful remarks when Dexter admits his wife has just died. Dexter reacts with extreme violence and beats the stranger to death. Still, Dexter does not show full real emotions until his mental image of Harry tells him that it is acceptable for him to do so:

Harry: That's the first human thing I've seen you do since she died, Dexter.

Dexter: I thought you'd left me.

Harry: I'm here, Dex. It's okay, son... to show what you're feeling.

(5.1)

Only after the dominant male figure in his life approves the display of emotions does Dexter release a scream, indicating pain, frustration and rage. Shortly afterwards, he attends Rita's funeral and eventually realizes, through his inner monologue, that he did, in fact, love her. In his eulogy, he admits that his perception of himself as inhuman has changed through his relationship with Rita: "I wasn't even human when we first met. I never expected that to change. She reached out and found something I didn't even know was there" (5.1). The narrative of Dexter evolving into a better person capable of love through his relationship with Rita might become problematic in the light of the perception of both asexuals and people with mental health issues as less than human. As explored in Chapter 3, asexuality has been portrayed as unhealthy and treatable in the media and several medical professionals have expressed concern that people who wish to label themselves as asexual should attempt a sexual relationship, because they might be, so to speak, cured of their asexuality. The pattern of Dexter's progress indicates that his emotional state – and his mental health – is heavily reliant on his romantic and

sexual relationships with women. His sister has been a part of his life since they were children, and yet it is not she who changes Dexter's emotional state and makes him capable of vocalizing his love for her. Dexter admits to himself that he has loved Rita after her death, at the beginning of season 5, while he only tells Debra that he loves her at the end of season 6 and she clearly states that it is something he has never done before:

Debra: I love you.

Dexter: I love you too.

Debra: You do? Dexter: Of course I do.

Debra: I don't think you've ever said it before.

(6.12)

Despite his love for Debra, it is only after Rita – after his first sexual encounter with a woman which does not end with her leaving him – that Dexter can seek this emotional connection with other women, namely Lumen and Hannah. Thus, *Dexter* treats the lack of sexual attraction and interest in a similar manner to *TBBT*. A character entering a sexual relationship is changed for the better, attaining the ability to feel emotions that are often cited as an important part of being human, predominantly romantic love. Sexuality is treated in both series as the basis for humanizing the potentially asexual characters and eliminating or lessening their flaws, which could stem from the subconscious negative attitudes towards asexuals as the least human of all sexual orientations. In addition, portraying asexuality as curable and linking it with Dexter's psychopathy reveals the difficult connection between asexuality and disability. As discussed in section 1.2, asexual people have refused to be categorized as disabled, and disabled people have struggled with asexuality being forcibly ascribed to them by the able-bodied majority, creating tensions on both sides. In *Dexter*, it is not only asexuality that is eventually cured through romantic and sexual relationships. It is also Dexter's psychopathy, i.e. a psychological condition without any known successful treatment. As Sinwell points out, "Dexter's asexuality is linked to his pathology and psychosis. [...] his obsession with appearing normal through maintaining sexual relations thus further emphasizes the idea that one must be sexual in order to be normal" (169). However, it is not only the appearance of normalcy that Dexter achieves. By overcoming both his psychopathy and his asexuality to a certain degree through his sexual and romantic relationships, he also exemplifies the pervasive myth of the curative power of sex. Przybylo describes this phenomenon as follows:

sex is understood as integral to a ‘healthy’ body and mind and as at the core of ‘healthy’ relationships. This ‘sex for health’ discourse, or the ‘healthicization of sex,’ increases the pressure to have sex, rendering ‘unhealthy’ and ‘unfulfilled’ those individuals, such as asexuals, who do not desire sex, do not sufficiently enjoy it, or engage in it infrequently. Of course, sex for health renders healthy very particular forms of sex, namely coupled, heterosexual, coital, and “safe” sex. It renders specific configurations and quantities of sex as integral to well-being, as natural, acontextually good, and as the obligation and moral responsibility of each individual.

(“Masculine Doubt” 230)

This narrative contributes to the medicalization of asexuality, and the portrayal of asexual characters being cured through their adherence to the societal norms by entering a sexual relationship reinforces the notion that asexuality should be categorized as a disease, and that asexual people will be transformed for the better if they maintain a relationship considered ‘healthy’ – i.e. (hetero)sexual, committed relationship with the purpose of eventually starting a family (Przybylo, “Masculine Doubt” 228-229).

Another important factor in the ‘no sissy stuff’ rule of masculinity is the approach to the male body. *Dexter* exposes the significant mechanisms behind the management of a man’s organism for example through the protagonist’s clothing: while he is predominantly seen in loose, light-colored dress shirts that cover his arms and shoulders, during his kills Dexter wears form-fitting dark clothes that reveal his muscles – superhero style. Similarly, he knows how to negotiate his own body politics, concealing or showing his physical strength, depending on the situation. While he often performs submissive behavior that could be perceived as weak, e.g. in the police station, the audience also sees him in numerous situations that make obvious his agility and his fighting skills. Furthermore, while Dexter remains highly aware of his body and its capabilities for the sake of not allowing his targets to overpower him and escape, he also ignores his body in a way mentioned by Reeser, i.e. ignoring his injuries. For instance, when he inhales poisonous gas and is advised by the medical personnel not to indulge in strenuous physical activities, he dismisses this warning and exerts himself until he becomes dizzy (6.11). In this, Dexter constructs his masculinity according to Reeser’s expectations – in a constant shift between displaying and hiding his body, based on the circumstances.

To conclude, the ‘no sissy rule’ of masculinity manifests in *Dexter* through several key factors. While homophobia or misogyny do not play a great role in the protagonist’s construction of masculine identity, these factors become relevant through

Dexter's interaction with other men, who sometimes use misogyny or homophobia as a standard means of bonding. Dexter exhibits signs of complicity when he fails to voice his disagreement with sexist or misogynistic remarks. His relationship with women can be described as troubled to a certain degree, due to the trauma caused by his mother's death and his pursuit of emotional connection with the women in his life. However, he does not generally act in a dominant, misogynistic or otherwise oppressive way. It can be concluded that Dexter does not exhibit the key factors of the 'no sissy stuff rule': he makes no effort to consciously distance himself from femininity or women, and thus, his masculinity hinges on the performance of other rules, particularly those tied to violence. However, his reflection of the 'no sissy stuff' rule can be seen in his adherence to the norms established by his main male role model, i.e. his father, and in his continuous struggle between covering and displaying his body. Finally, *Dexter* also brings to attention ways in which asexual men might be pressured to partake in misogynistic or sexist conversations and humor in order not to weaken their male friendships.

5.2 'Be a Big Wheel'

The second rule of masculinity according to Kimmel is based on the idea that it is "measured more by wealth, power, and status than by any particular body part" (*Guyland* 46). As explored in Chapter 2, power and success do not necessarily have to be represented by physical strength and wealth: being unmasculine in the contemporary society might mean "being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth" (Connell 67). One of the men in Harris' study explains success as "having smart men follow his directions, as not feeling intimidated by others, as dealing from a position of strength, and as not being concerned with material things. His main goal is to do right, not to conquer the world" (111). In other words, masculinities are measured by power, in physical, social and economic sense, by one's social status, ability to play sports or engage in other forms of physical activities, and also by the man's overt performance of sexual interest towards women. The factor of sexuality is especially relevant to the discussion of asexual masculinities. Yet, the other aspects of the 'be a big wheel' rule might also reveal how asexual men construct their masculinities without necessarily performing heterosexuality, and whether these factors are exaggerated by asexual men in order to compensate for the unavailability of sex as a basis for their masculinities.

The first factor, domineering behavior, is applicable to Dexter on the basis of his homicidal tendencies. In relation to the discussion about misogyny in section 5.1, he never becomes aggressive towards his girlfriends or his sister Debra. On the other hand, he is more than capable of using violence when provoked, e.g. by Sergeant Doakes. When this colleague threatens him, Dexter attacks him in private and then walks out into the police department, pretending that Doakes assaulted him for no reason (2.7). Nonetheless, Dexter's need to appear non-threatening forces him to employ peaceful solutions: for instance, he usually reacts to Sergeant Doakes' aggression with placating phrases or expressions, such as sitting while Doakes stands over him, not reacting to Doakes' verbal taunts and insults, or stepping down from physical confrontation in front of other people (1.1; 1.9). Similarly, Dexter performs submissive behavior when it suits his goals concerning his targets. Arthur Mitchell (John Lithgow), a.k.a. the Trinity Killer and the main antagonist of season 4, responds to Dexter's deliberate provocation with violence, and the protagonist immediately feigns ignorance and surprise, de-escalating the situation and preventing further physical confrontation. The protagonist's behavior could be perceived as detrimental to his masculinity; after all, submission in men is regarded as an effeminate quality (Kimmel and Aronson 391). However, Dexter uses the way other people perceive him with calculated precision, exhibiting intellectual dominance over the individuals that he tricks. Together with his physical strength, agility and combat capabilities displayed in secret, it is made clear to the audience that the performance of subordination is not his only option, but a deliberate choice.

The exhibition of physical violence and superior strength or agility are all connected to the ideal of masculinity, which is "linked mythically and practically to the role of the warrior [...] [the] ideal manhood lies in the exercise of force to dominate others" (Kimmel and Aronson 418). Harris explains that this necessity to dominate stems from the fact that men might perceive violence as "a necessary deterrent, the last resort used to settle disagreements when everything else fails. [Men might believe] in peace through strength" (127). Peace, in this sense, closely resembles domination: it stems from the ability to achieve one's goals through violence, and true peace is achieved when all resistance against one's ideals and ambitions has been eradicated through physical overpowering of the other. Where Sheldon in *TBBT* fails to establish relations of physical domination, due to his inability to play sports or participate in other forms of physical competition, he uses intellectual domination to assert his superiority over other men. In Dexter's case, despite his strength, the situation is often similar: as

previously shown, he frequently uses intellectual superiority to trick other men, e.g. into thinking he is non-threatening or weak. He uses both the physical and the intellectual forms of domination to achieve “peace through strength” (Harris 127), reinforcing the message about the necessity of domineering behavior in the creation of asexual masculinities.

As described in Chapter 4, physical spaces play an important role in the creation of masculine identities, because men struggle to “become larger, to take up more space, and yield less of it” (Thomas 55). At first glance, due to Dexter’s performance of submission and his attempts to appear ordinary and non-threatening, it would seem that occupying and protecting his space does not play a great role in his performance of masculinity. For instance, in the pilot episode, a killer breaks into Dexter’s apartment and leaves a dismembered Barbie doll in his freezer as a message. His reaction is not fear or irritation, even though he acknowledges the potential for these emotions: “I suppose I should be upset, even feel violated, but I’m not. No. In fact, I think this is a friendly message, kind of like, ‘Hey, want to play?’” (1.1). In this instance, Dexter’s fascination with this killer’s method is greater than is unrest about his space being invaded. It could potentially be explained by the lack of malicious intent, or at least Dexter’s understanding of the situation as non-threatening. He also respects this criminal for his clean disposal of bodies, which might play a role in his easy acceptance of his trespassing. On other occasions, the protagonist reacts less favorably to an unexpected approach: for instance, Arthur Mitchell enters his space in a subtle manner when he comes to the police department where Dexter works. He had lied to Arthur about who he is, and so this breach is meant to be a threat, informing Dexter that Arthur is aware of his true identity (4.11). A similarly situation arises with Vince’s student assistant, Louis (Josh Cooke), who exhibits hateful thoughts towards Dexter and disregards his warnings about staying away. Louis invades Dexter’s home and even touches his son, stroking his hair, which Dexter also interprets as a threat: “He’s not scared of me at all. And he’s not going to quit unless I stop him” (7.2). Since Dexter has promised Debra not to kill at that time, he physically removes Louis from his home by leaving him drugged on a beach, and then arranges for the young man to lose his internship, which removes him from Dexter’s the workspace as well. Louis attempts to retaliate through another breach of privacy: he finds Dexter’s boat and attempts to sink it, but he loses his life when he encounters men seeking revenge on Dexter (7.3). Another one of Dexter’s victims, a police officer named Zoey Kruger (Christina Cox),

breaks into his house after she finds out that Dexter has been investigating her. While he remains hidden in the shadows and watches her touch the children's toys and books, he angrily thinks: "That hand's the first thing I cut off" (4.4).

Dexter's fishing boat, significantly called *Slice of Life*, is also crucial to the discussion of physical spaces. It becomes a means to freedom in a sense that Dexter uses it to dispose of the bodies of his victims; it also symbolizes freedom in its representation of movement. The boat is the place which Dexter controls with the greatest success: allowing people entry represents his allowing someone into close confidence in his life. Towards the end of season 2, Dexter takes Rita and her children out on the sea while thinking: "For so long my boat has been a tool of my dark trade. A graveyard transport. I'd almost forgotten it could double as a pleasure craft" (2.11). Allowing Rita and her children to enter this space is a metaphorical expression of Dexter allowing them fully into his life. Similarly, Dexter invites Lumen after they kill her rapist together: he is wondering whether she will make him "whole" (5.8). While his victims usually only enter after they have been killed and divided into plastic bags, Dexter also allows Isaak Sirko on board, in order to get the man to a place where his lover has been thrown into the ocean by Dexter, which metaphorically allows Isaak into Dexter's life and his thoughts. In the last season, Dexter takes his sister, Debra, and Dr. Evelyn Vogel out to the sea to dispose of a body. When the psychiatrist asks him why he brought the two of them, Dexter replies that he wanted to be with family (8.5). Ultimately, the boat becomes the means through which Dexter both loses and rebuilds his existence and his entire identity when he allows himself to be caught in a hurricane after disposing of Debra's body (8.12).

The need not to yield space is also apparent in his relationship with his wife, Rita. After Dexter asks her to marry him, she suggests that they should move in together and he should sell his apartment, which seems to surprise Dexter at first. He says that he wanted to keep his home, and later focuses on a kill, thinking that "Rita [...] may be busy planning my life and where I'll live. But there are some things I still control" (3.5). For Dexter, the loss of his apartment means loss of control. He lies to Rita and keeps it after their wedding, which later culminates in an argument when she accidentally discovers that he has not sold it. She asks Dexter to attend a counseling session, which brings into focus the importance of real, physical spaces to the construction of Dexter's identity (4.6). Debra also comments on his keeping the flat: "No offence, but you're the last person who needs a fuck pad" (3.5). Her words indicate that asexual men might face

some problems when communicating the need for a private, personal space. Debra assumes that the only reason why a married man might want to keep his apartment is sexual in nature, and for someone like Dexter who does not exhibit any need for sexual activities, especially not outside his existing relationship, it is impossible for her to understand why her brother might need his own place.

Status is also an important factor in the ‘be a big wheel’ rule of masculinity. In Dexter’s case, it would appear that his position as a forensic scientist does not play a great role in his identity. Nevertheless, Dexter’s kills rely on his ability to use technology to find his victim before the police arrests them, i.e. using intellectual superiority to achieve his goals. This behavior might be linked to geek masculinities, in that men who belong to this category often use detailed knowledge of a specific subject to express superiority over others, as examined in section 2.2. Dexter’s expertise relates to a more practical subject than video games or television shows, as opposed to Sheldon in *TBBT*. However, his skill with technology allows Dexter victory over the police department, i.e. predominantly over other men. One of the few occasions where he experiences an elevation in social status is his high school reunion:

Harry: You’ve had a personal tragedy. Unlike everyone else, you look better than you did twenty years ago, and you’ve got a cool job. Put all those things together, and it makes you...

Dexter: Popular.

Harry: How’s it feel?

Dexter: I hate it.

Harry: Come on, it’s great. Most of the people here would love to be popular.

Dexter: Most of the people here don’t have two rolls of duct tape, eighty yards of plastic sheeting, and a surgical saw in their truck.

Harry: It’s not the end of the world, Dex.

Dexter: No, but it definitely makes things more difficult. I’m used to flying under the radar.

Harry: So you’re flying a little higher. That’s a good thing.

Dexter: So what am I supposed to do?

Harry: Enjoy it, son.

(6.1)

Based on Harry’s advice, Dexter is shown to be enjoying his sudden elevation in status as he talks to a group of his former classmates and even agrees when one of them calls forensic scientists “modern American cowboys” (6.1), a highly masculine image of a job that is usually described in less favorable, less masculine terms. The protagonist seems to keep his social status deliberately lower in order to be inconspicuous: as we saw with submission, this seems a deliberate choice on his part instead of a

circumstance of his life which he cannot change. In addition, Dexter does seem to enjoy a certain position as an expert: for instance, when Louis first witnesses his analysis of a crime scene, he is impressed and calls him a “fucking rock star” (6.6), validating Dexter’s masculinity through approval and admiration. At the end of the show, Dexter deliberately gives up his success as a forensic expert: in the last episode, he is seen working at a lumber mill instead of in a scientific field (8.12). Through this change, Dexter trades masculinity built on professional success in science for a more traditionally male work, supporting the idea that violence and physical strength hold more significance for the creation of his identity than work-related success or social status.

Success and power can also translate to the creation of masculine identities through sex. As discussed in depth through the example of Sheldon Cooper, phallic power is tied to social status and social power, despite the fact that it remains unclear “what comes first” (Kegan Gardiner 355). Furthermore, asexual men might be led to believe that sex holds the greatest importance in relationships with women, and failure to sexually satisfy their partners can result in the perception of self as less masculine. Przybylo calls this belief “sexual imperative” and states that it is constructed around the image of a “heterosexual (preferably married) couple, which actively and regularly partakes in sex and eventually strives toward the creation of a family” (“Masculine Doubt” 228-229). One of the asexual men in Przybylo’s study explicitly stated that it is considered a part of the success in life “to be married and to have two and a half kids” (“Masculine Doubt” 229). The concepts of sex, relationships and family are interconnected in a way that might create difficulty for asexual men to navigate the notion of success without performing heterosexuality in a way that results in the socially acceptable life. Dexter attempts to achieve the status afforded to him by a committed heterosexual relationship and starting a family, however, in the end he chooses to abandon his son and his partner, Hannah, for the solitary life at a lumber mill (8.12). Reeser states that men might then seek to “remasculinize the self in sex, looking for other ways to give pleasure to another person” (103). In Dexter’s case, re-masculinization ultimately happens through physical strength and violence, as with the other aspects of male identity where Dexter might be found lacking.

Dexter demonstrates the interconnectedness of phallic and social power, as well as the re-masculinization process through violence, when he loses his ability to kill and at the same time, becomes incapable of performing sexually (2.1). This loss of power,

rooted in Dexter's killing of his own brother at the end of season 1, makes Dexter doubt his identity: "When I picked up the knife, it's like I didn't know who I was. [...] Now, I'm just a little bug" (2.1). Considering that Dexter usually compares himself to a powerful animal, e.g. a lion (3.3), his comparison of himself to a bug points towards a change in his self-perception. The murder of his brother might be metaphorically seen as the killing of an important part of Dexter's masculinity: Brian has presented himself as an alternative to Dexter's male role model, which used to be Harry.

Brian: You can be yourself around me. Who. Am. I?

Dexter: A killer. Without reason or regret. Free.

Brian: You can be that way too.

Dexter: But the code –

Brian: Dex! You don't have a code. Harry did. Now he's been dead ten years.

You can't keep him sitting on your shoulder like Jiminy Fucking Cricket!

You need to embrace who you are now.

Dexter: I don't know who I am.

Brian: 'Course you don't. You've been away from your family since you were three. But I'm here now. I can help you. We can take this journey together.

(1.12)

As Santaulària explains, Harry's presence in Dexter's life is not only that of a personification of Dexter's conscience: "Harry's lore emerges not only as an individual code Dexter has to follow [...] but also as the embodiment of [...] the patriarchal values that need to be preserved at all costs to guarantee Dexter's invulnerability [...] [and] the survival of the 'traditional man' in danger of extinction" (65-66). If Harry represents the traditional, patriarchal values that need to be preserved, then Brian personifies the "neoliberal language of rational choice in which the criminal as a white, middle-class social actor has no need of the state" (Byers 144). The loss of his brother detaches Dexter from the potential freedoms available through the deliberate dismissal of societal rules. Murdering Brian results in a loss of identity for Dexter, when the masculinity shaped by Harry is no longer sufficient, and the kind represented by Brian is not available either. According to Przybylo, sex and identity are connected through societal expectations: "sex becomes configured in the sexual imperative as synonymous with the self, so that to know who we are, we must know who we are sexually" ("Masculine Doubt" 229). In *Dexter*, it is the other way around: the protagonist's loss of identity results in his incapability to perform sexually, which once again codes asexuality as either the result of an unsuccessful project of modern masculinities, represented by

Brian, or a health problem rather than an orientation. Dexter's identity crisis stems from the discovery of the truth about his biological family, and from his murder of Brian, i.e. the last living relative and a potential male role model in his life (1.12). This metaphorical discarding of a masculine role model results in a feeling of powerlessness when Dexter fails to kill a man and then to perform sexually with his girlfriend. Rita invites him to her house and initiates intercourse, stating that she suddenly had an urge to have sex. Dexter replies that he is all for satisfying urges, however, in his inner monologue, he wonders why he was not able to satisfy his own last night, meaning that he was unable to kill (2.1).

After this failure, Dexter seeks to re-masculinize himself, i.e. to gain back power, through murder of a criminal named Little Chino (Matthew Willig), who is physically larger and stronger. Dexter even comments that he needs the challenge (2.1). This re-masculinization happens partly through the very technique he utilizes to murder his victims: "Dexter often forces his victims to acknowledge the fear and pain they have caused others and immediately afterwards (while they are conscious), penetrates his various victims with knives or other sharp objects – a penetration that could arguably be read as phallic" (B. Johnson 81). In addition, and as developed in section 4.2, phallic power is not necessarily represented only by objects of a phallic shape or by penetration alone. Nudity as such can play a significant part in the relations of dominance among men, and Dexter utilizes these relations when he strips his victims naked before tying them to his table, their genitals covered by a thin layer of plastic wrap. In contrast to his exposed victims, Dexter performs his kills clothed in long sleeves and gloves, often with a butcher's apron and a protective shield for his face, which visually puts him into an infallibly dominant position over his targets. However, in season 2, he fails to access this phallic power and re-masculinize himself through killing Little Chino (2.1). Only after Dexter privately admits that Brian's death has had an impact on him does he become capable of murder again: "I had to say goodbye, in order to reconnect with what's really important. With who I was. With who I have to be" (2.2). Regaining his capability to achieve an erection and provide sexual pleasure to his partner is not addressed for several episodes, until Dexter reinstates himself as a man through a sexual relationship with Lila West, and later on, with Rita. Dexter is celebrating his victory over Doakes and over the police by doing things he would not have been allowed to do from prison if he had been caught, and he visits Rita, on one of the very few occasions when Dexter is the one to initiate a sexual encounter. Sex here becomes a contrast to a

life in jail, a symbol of freedom for Dexter, and a way of reconnecting with Rita after having cheated on her with Lila. Yet, Dexter's violence and his ability to commit murder appear more important to his self-perception and the construction of his masculinity than the ability to perform sexually. In this, Dexter shows another similarity to Sheldon Cooper: both characters display disinterest in sexual activity and appear to construct their gender identities on different bases, yet they are portrayed as skilled lovers capable of satisfying their partners. Sexuality also plays an important role on their way to self-improvement and character growth, once again drawing on the narrative of sex as indispensable for the development of a healthy adult identity (Decker; Przybylo).

Despite certain scenes like the one described above, Dexter does not use sex to gain power over the woman with whom he is involved. In fact, Lila comments that he is unusually willing to follow instructions during a sexual encounter, considering that most men would have a problem with it (2.7). In addition, Dexter ridicules the idea that he could use sex as a way to establish power over a woman: when he captures a female victim, Zoe, and she asks him if he is going to rape her, Dexter does not understand why she would think so and even laughs: "What is it with you and rape? No one's raping anyone. Mm, killing, on the other hand..." (4.4). This instance illustrates that Dexter's power over other people is created through de-sexualized violence, but not through sexual aggression or assault.

Nonetheless, performing heterosexual interest and relationships grants Dexter certain social status among his peers. Especially his relationships with Lila and Hannah can be understood as granting him a certain level of heterosexual masculinity in the eyes of his friends. These women are viewed as sexually attractive, and his relationships with them cause Dexter to be perceived as more manly. His masculinity is also reinforced through the interest women display in him, even when he does not establish a relationship with them, e.g. a female neighbor in season 8. Dexter's heteronormative gender is thus redeemed also through the sexual relationships with women, despite the fact that he predominantly lacks attraction to them. The assumption that in order to establish a traditional masculine identity, a man should show heterosexual interest and be capable of sexually satisfying his partner (Kimmel and Aronson 545; Przybylo, "Masculine Doubt" 240) is prevalent in Dexter's creation of his public self and in the way he performs heterosexuality as a duty and as a guise of normalcy. For this reason, it is possible to conclude that Dexter experiences greater social pressure to perform

heterosexuality than Sheldon from *TBBT*: while Sheldon has no inherent need to create a public persona as a cover of his true self, Dexter, by virtue of not wanting to be discovered as a killer, cannot fully express his disinterest in sexual encounters.

The second rule of masculinity, as presented in *Dexter*, thus shows the importance of power which asexual men might utilize to establish or reinforce masculine identities. Physical and metaphorical spaces are an important factor in the performance of dominant attitudes towards other men, while the utilization of phallic power and sexual dominance does not appear important for the identity of an asexual character. Still, performing heterosexuality is revealed as an indispensable tool in the construction of a public persona and the pretense of belonging into a majority group. While status and success do not stand out as significantly contributing to Dexter's self-perception, these factors of creating a masculine identity are available and often presented as important for the way he is perceived by others. The protagonist accesses intellectual dominance through his day job as a forensic scientist, where he often demonstrates superior knowledge in his ability to analyze a crime scene. However, Dexter predominantly exhibits dominating behavior in the form of physical violence, through which he establishes and reinforces his masculine identity. In this, *Dexter* shows that physical domination does not necessarily tie into sexuality. The achievement of superiority through violence is available to asexual men as a factor of masculinity they might perform in an exaggerated manner to compensate for the inaccessibility of sexuality. Similarly to Sheldon Cooper, Dexter Morgan is portrayed as capable of adequate sexual performance with his partners, which highlights the importance of sexuality in the creation of male characters in television shows. Asexual men might feel pressured to perform sexually even without having any inherent interest in intercourse, and also to perform heterosexuality in order to establish the status of a 'normal' man in a heteronormative society.

5.3 'Be a Sturdy Oak'

The third rule of masculinity prescribes men to be "confident, secure, reliable, inexpressive, and utterly cool, especially during a crisis" (Kimmel, *The Gender* 71). While all of these factors may contribute to the creation of asexual masculinities, the notions of being inexpressive and reliable appear to have the closest link to asexuality. First of all, what creates this illusion of reliability is not necessarily the ability to react well to stressful or difficult situations, but the pretense of being similar to an inanimate

object such as a pillar, a rock, or, indeed, an oak (Kimmel, *Guyland* 46). The sturdiness implied in the very name of this rule can be understood both from a physical and psychological viewpoint: while men are asked to become physically immovable and not yield their space, as explored in sections 4.2 and 5.2, the pretense of an inanimate object also pertains to the idea that they should not express their emotions. Through this category of emotional distance, the ‘sturdy oak’ rule ties into the ‘no sissy stuff’ rule. Proof of masculine identity, according to Kimmel, lies in “holding emotions in check [...] [or] never showing your emotions at all” (*The Gender* 31). As discussed above, Dexter’s inability to feel emotions is one of the focal points of the character. Being a psychopath, he rarely shows anything other than frustration or anger, which, through violence, become representative of masculinity rather than undervaluing Dexter’s identity as a man. This emotional coldness and a difficulty in expressing one’s feelings are both stereotypically associated with asexual people (Van Houdenhove *et al.* 184). However, by carefully examining the tenets of the ‘sturdy oak’ rule, it becomes clear that masculinity is created through the active suppression and hiding of emotions rather than a complete lack of them. In addition, responsibility is frequently discussed in terms of adulthood. Being responsible is a crucial factor in becoming a fully mature, self-sufficient person. Since asexual people often face accusations of immaturity, examining the portrayal of responsibility in *Dexter* might provide valuable insight into the question of asexual masculinities in contemporary television shows.

The emotionless state seemingly sought through the ‘sturdy oak’ rule closely resembles the perception of asexuality as it has been presented in the media in the past decades. Asexuals have been consistently described as less than human in the media by both professionals and laypeople (Bell; Tucker), and asexual men have been portrayed as effeminate, i.e. less masculine. For instance, Kilborn’s satire clearly depicted an asexual man, Sebastian, as stereotypically effeminate in his mannerisms. Furthermore, Sheldon from *TBBT* also appears incapable of controlling his emotions and often reacts strongly to minor discomfort or misfortune. While it might appear that the prescribed male emotionlessness and the perception of asexuals as distant or lacking would correspond and help asexual men perform their masculine identities with more ease, the representation of asexual men on television becomes even more problematic due to this presumed compatibility.

In television fiction, asexuals are portrayed either as immature, in the case of Sheldon, or effeminate, in satire such as Sebastian the Asexual Icon. In the corpus

selected for this dissertation, both Sheldon's and Dexter's asexuality are linked to pathology. The former's behavior, whether understood as merely bizarre or a direct result of an autism spectrum condition, is portrayed as abnormal and curable through his development of a romantic and sexual relationship with his girlfriend. In the latter's case, a similar development can be perceived in his admitted psychopathy (Sinwell 169). While he frequently references and ponders his lack of emotions in the earlier seasons, through his relationships with several women, i.e. his romantic and sexual development, Dexter gains the ability to feel emotions and, paradoxically, becomes more human and by extension, more masculine. This is particularly evident in the last episode of the show, where the protagonist, now genuinely feeling love for his sister, his son and also Hannah McKay, asserts his new identity as a lumberjack, the very image of a 'sturdy oak' masculine identity (8.12). Dexter's inability to feel is eventually improved through a sexual relationship, once again bringing into focus the prevalence of the notion that sex might cure asexuals of their perceived faults. The examples of Sheldon and Dexter allude to the possibility that it is not a lack of emotions altogether that defines masculinity, but the ability to control and withhold them in order to closely resemble an inanimate object. As Harris writes, "it is a manly virtue to be stoical – strong, calm and unmoved by good or bad fortune. [...] The 'stoic' message encourages men to control emotions and deny wounds" (138). If this is the case, asexual men might face a unique set of challenges due to the ingrained perception of asexuals as emotionless. Even if controlling emotions might reinforce one's masculine identity, a complete lack of feeling is still understood as a fault and a sign of inhumanity, and thus an undesirable trait. The belief that asexuals are emotionally cold might then make the use of stoicism as a factor in the creation of one's masculine identity unavailable to asexual men, who might wish to distance themselves from these negative stereotypes.

This dehumanization of asexual individuals is strongly present in Dexter's inner monologues, and the importance of societal opinions on what constitutes normal behavior frequently becomes the focal point of his quest for a stable identity. On several occasions, the character adheres to the idea of himself as non-human, i.e. a monster, only to later retract his thoughts and admit that his identity could be construed in another way. In one of the first episodes, Dexter thinks: "I spend my life pretending I'm not [a monster]" (1.4), alluding to the performance of socially acceptable behavior. However, at the end of the same episode, Dexter refuses to perform this identity, which is expected of him from a male role model, i.e. his brother, Brian. At that point, Dexter is

not aware that the Ice Truck Killer, who left an innocent man in his hands to be murdered, is actually his biological brother. However, Dexter already admires the technique this criminal uses in his homicides and thus looks up to him. Eventually, he refuses to murder the innocent man and debates his adherence to the monster identity, as chosen for him both by his father, Harry, and the Ice Truck Killer, i.e. two male role models that Dexter respects: "I'm not the monster [the Ice Truck Killer] wants me to be so I'm neither man nor beast. I'm something new entirely, with my own set of rules. I'm Dexter" (1.4). While the use of the word *man* could be perceived as a somewhat obsolete or poetic synonym for *human*, it could also symbolize Dexter's struggle with the creation or assertion of a masculine identity in the face of his refusal to adhere to the demands of a masculine role model. The story of Dexter's upbringing can even be linked to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

In the abstract, turning Dexter into a serial killer with a conscience, for Harry, kills several birds with one stone (or knife), from his guilt and frustration to his concerns over Dexter's future. [...] But, as he sees the end result of his training, as he sees the living, breathing, murdering truth of it all, as he sees the monster [...] with a detective's code and the ruse of normalcy, there is only blood and body parts. For all of the lessons that he teaches Dexter, the final lessons are Harry's, and these are the lessons of *Frankenstein* [...]. Violating moral and social laws in the name of an ideal does not lead to retribution or vindication.

(Howard 67)

Dexter is created by his adoptive father as neither man nor beast. The traditional masculine identity is unavailable to him due his lack of emotions, especially towards women, and the identity of a monster created by the societal expectations and perceptions of certain behaviors is inaccessible for his personal self-identification.

Where the thought of disobeying Harry might previously have seemed like blasphemy [...] Dexter no longer appears to work for his father's approval. He now takes strength from his disobedience and from his existence as a living abstraction, and, in his dismissal of Harry, he finds self-affirmation. But, as *Frankenstein* suggests, the influence, the effects, and the legacy of the creator are not so easily abandoned or discarded.

(Howard 70-71)

The difficulty with abandoning the legacy of his father, i.e. his creator, arises when Dexter periodically abandons and returns to Harry's code in the following seasons. This might indicate how asexual men struggle to create a masculine identity: the traditional factors of masculinity are often tied to sexuality or interest in women and much like for

homosexual men, these factors might be unavailable to asexual men as well. Furthermore, the identity of a 'monster', i.e. an inhuman, robot-like creature, is unfavorable in nature and inherently perceived as less masculine, creating discrepancies and anxieties instead of allowing for the creation of a stable masculine identity.

One of the most significant factors of the 'sturdy oak' rule is self-reliance. Together with reliability, these two factors are also important for the notion of adulthood, which becomes relevant when discussing the identities of asexual people who are often perceived as immature. The image of men as self-reliant can be exemplified by a cartoon character, the Lone Ranger:

A stranger who literally hides his emotions behind a mask charges onto the scene, handles difficult situations well, and then leaves before anybody can get to know him. He is strong, competent, bold, and inscrutable. A self-reliant man is hard working, does not take charity, supports himself, takes pride in his accomplishments, does not need advice, and does not let others tell him what to do. An independent survivor, he does not trust others.

(Harris 134-135)

This description of an ideal of a self-reliant American man is notably similar to Dexter Morgan. Hiding behind a figurative mask of normalcy, he handles difficult situations in secret, with competency and boldness. He supports himself, shows pride in his accomplishments through gestures like collecting trophy blood slides from his kills, and acts without requesting advice or help from other people. Through the show, Dexter predominantly relies on his own abilities, intelligence and strength for problem resolution, despite the fact that a great part of his opinions about himself and the world seem to be formed on the basis of what his father has taught him. He questions his own motives or decisions, and his doubts take the imaginary form of Harry Morgan, particularly when he considers trusting or relying on another person. For instance, when he befriends Miguel Prado, Dexter's inner monologue with the image of his adoptive father represents his doubts:

Harry: What makes you think you can count on Miguel? [...] You don't know what you're getting into. You've never had to rely on anyone else before, Dexter.

Dexter: Because you taught me loneliness is an art form. But guess what, I finally have a life with a family and now a friend... who I trust.

Harry: We only see two things in people... what we wanna see and what they wanna show us. You don't know Miguel any more than he knows you.

Dexter: You aren't seriously gonna lecture me on relationships after the debris field you left behind.

Harry: No matter how close two people are, an infinite distance separates them.
Look at you and me.

(3.6)

Dexter's thoughts, both in his own voice and in the imagined words of Harry, reveal the loneliness inherent in the 'sturdy oak' rule of masculinity. Self-reliance, and by extension, loneliness, taught to young boys as the art of masculinity creates emotional distance that is difficult to overcome in adult relationships, and can hinder the performance of the modern male role, which includes emotional intimacy with women (Harris 18). Dexter struggles between the loneliness as masculinity taught to him by his father, and the idea of a new masculine identity he strives for. However, according to Harris, the modern male role is characterized by emotional intimacy with women and weak male bonding, which opposes Dexter's goals in his rebellion against Harry's lessons. On the other hand, Dexter's deliberate suppression of impulsive and angry behavior distances him from the traditional male role. Frequently, in modern narratives,

men have to learn to manage their aggression as a response to a supposed genderquake that threatens to make them redundant if they do not go through a rehabilitation process and embrace their feminine sides [...] In this context, Dexter's on-going effort to repress his Dark Passenger is also the fight of many modern-day men who are forced to adapt to the demands of women or perish, or, at least, remain single.

(Santaulària 62)

Dexter strives to achieve balance between traditional and modern masculine identities – similarly to Sheldon from *TBBT*, Dexter does not fully fall into either category. This dilemma points towards the necessity of self-reliance. Where the established roles cannot be fully adopted, Dexter needs to create his own version of a male identity. Overcoming the resulting emotional distance and connecting to another person proves difficult, particularly at the beginning of the show, where he fantasizes about a world where he would be entirely alone and reliant only on himself: "I like to pretend I'm alone. Completely alone. Maybe post-apocalypse or plague... Whatever" (1.5). Even in the final seasons, Dexter retreats to the self-reliant position of an eternal loner: "As kids, Deb and I would try to outrun the waves, but I would always end up diving under them. I'd swim deep because I could withstand the pull of the tide. But Deb was always safest at shore. From here on out, I'll face the depths by myself" (7.5). Dexter's retreat is frequently connected with his fear of being revealed as abnormal and then abandoned by the important people in his life. Asexual men might face this obstacle in negotiating

close personal relationships, due to the prejudice against asexuality rooted in the society (Prause and Graham 353). Furthermore, the image of a loner is connected to the stereotype about how asexuals must be inherently lonely (Decker 117-118).

Self-reliance and the image of masculinity as the Lone Ranger figure also rely on the notion of independent movement. As proved in 4.3, Sheldon in *TBBT* is limited in this respect due to his inability to learn how to drive, and is consistently dependent on others for transportation. Dexter stands in direct opposition to Sheldon in this aspect of masculinity: in every episode, he is depicted driving his car not only in his own city but also across the country for a kill. He also frequently uses his boat, and both modes of transportation play a great role in the construction of his independence. After Dexter is involved in an accident and forbidden to drive for a week, he exhibits great distress about this loss of independence (4.2). Furthermore, he thinks of his boat as a space for solitude and absolute freedom, and it becomes the basis for his new life at the end of the show, when he sails out into the open sea disregarding the risk of a hurricane approaching (8.12). Dexter's self-reliance in this aspect of 'sturdy oak' masculinity demonstrates that independent movement is a factor of masculine identity available to asexual men as well.

In addition to placing great value on self-reliance, Dexter also consciously uses this aspect of masculine identity to his benefit, i.e. he performs dependence much as he performs submission in order to achieve goals related to his kills. When he is gathering information on Arthur Mitchell, the Trinity Killer, Dexter adopts the role of a lonely man in need of assistance with his life, purposefully playing into Arthur's masculine need to be reliable and relied on by others. This allows Dexter to infiltrate Arthur's life in ways that would be impossible without the performance of dependence (4.8). Arthur obviously does not want to allow Dexter to come with him at first. However, after confirming that there is no one else Dexter can rely on, he agrees eventually. Dexter thus shows the ability to calculate his behavior on the basis of the very rules of masculinity he himself partially subscribes to. His self-reliance, i.e. his ability to handle difficult situations, to become an independent survivor as the Lone Ranger figure, partially stems from the ability to perform acts of submission or dependence.

Self-reliance is closely connected to another aspect of the 'sturdy oak' rule, which is reliability. A man should not rely on other people, but he must be able to provide support and help for others in his life, particularly women and children. Reliability becomes an important marker in the notion of adulthood, which relates to the

stereotype of asexual people as immature, as previously discussed in Chapter 3 (“Not Attracted to Either Sex?”; “Young and Asexual”; “The Lives of Otters”) The person who appears to be most reliant on Dexter is his sister, Debra, who frequently tells him Dexter is all she has, or that he is the only one she can count on (2.1; 2.10; 7.8). Through the constant reinforcement of Dexter’s sense of reliability, Debra fulfils the role of validating her brother’s masculinity. He appears to struggle with the amount of responsibility he is willing to take in regard to other people. He frequently doubts whether the people he is close to would lead a better life without him, e.g. after Rita’s funeral in season 5. Nonetheless, he also takes offense when someone suggests he is unreliable. For instance, when he comes home late and the babysitter, upset about having to stay the night, says: “[Harrison] needs a reliable parent. Especially with his mother gone” (5.4). Dexter appears to be offended by the suggestion and responds: “I’m reliable” (5.4).

Fatherhood brings to the forefront the importance of reliability to the construction of Dexter’s masculine identity, as well as the reinforcement of his adulthood. Kimmel mentions five basic markers of adulthood which have been used by demographers for decades: “leaving home, completing one’s education, starting work, getting married, and becoming a parent” (*Guyland* 24). The last two of these life events emphasize the importance of heterosexual partnerships with the intention of starting a family, as previously mentioned in Przybylo’s interviews with asexual men (“Masculine Doubt” 229). Getting married and having children is not only related to the construction of adulthood, but also a healthy identity in the heteronormative society. At the beginning of season 3, Dexter is in a committed relationship with Rita, which brings him into a paternal position regarding her two children, Astor (Christina Robinson) and Cody (Preston Bailey). Cody in particular casts Dexter into the role of a father, e.g. when he asks Dexter to attend ‘Dad Day’ at his school (3.1) or says that he wants to be like Dexter when he grows up (4.1). When Rita reveals that she is pregnant with Dexter’s child in season 3, he faces a dilemma due to his incapability of feeling joy about the news. Moreover, he fears that the child might be like him. He imagines his child hurting Astor and Cody (3.1), or worries that Rita’s death might cause his son, Harrison, to become the same as Dexter (5.3) – since they both witnessed the murder of their respective mothers. Dexter tends to be protective of the women in his life and is

similarly protective of his son, Harrison (Evan & Luke Kruntchev, Jadon Wells, Lucas Adams)¹². He claims that nothing is wrong with Harrison when other parents at a playground suggest that the boy scratched some of the children (5.5). And Dexter's identity as a father is confirmed by other people as a new crucial factor of his identity, e.g. by Debra (6.1), or Lumen, who claims: "I know you what you are deep down, aside from your police job and your extracurricular activities. You're a father. I saw the pictures out there" (5.6). This suggests that the role of a father has become inseparable from Dexter's identity, as well as a goal he personally wishes to achieve, despite the doubts he apparently still has about his ability to be a good father:

Harry: Dexter, there's a reason serial killers don't have children. You can't be killer and dad. Haven't you learned anything? [Astor's] mother is dead because of you.

Dexter: Which is why I need to make things right and be a good father. [...] Jordan Chase told me to figure out what I want most. The answer is simple. To be a good dad.

(5.9)

Dexter's inner monologue before and throughout fatherhood is markedly different. Before Harrison is born, Dexter's priority is maintaining the pretense of normalcy and freedom to kill. After he becomes a father, Dexter's thoughts are frequently concerned with Harrison's well-being: "Life is good. I'm not at all unhappy. [...] I have to think about what [Harrison] wants and what's best for him [...] This ritual has become my favorite. Bedtime. Alone with my son. Being myself" (6.2). This inner monologue indicates that Dexter's happiness does not necessarily stem from romantic relationships with women: he claims that he is not unhappy, despite his wife having been killed previously. Fatherhood affirms Dexter's masculinity much like Debra's dependence on him. Dexter has to be reliable, and is allowed to feel that way, when he is taking care of his son as a single father. His thoughts also become focused on Harrison's needs instead of his own, and paradoxically, he discloses that he feels like he is being himself with his son. Still, when Harrison reveals superficial knowledge of Dexter's box with blood slides, Dexter concludes that he cannot be fully himself with his son after all: "As much as I want Harrison to stay this way forever, from now on [...] I can no longer allow him to see the real me. Only the version that's make-believe. It's the only way this story gets

¹² Harrison Morgan is played by several actors due to the different ages that he is seen in throughout the show.

to have a happy ending” (6.2). Dexter, an atheist, even briefly turns to prayer and bargains with God when Harrison is in surgery with appendicitis (6.4), exposing the impact fatherhood has had on his development. After Debra finds out about Dexter’s killing, she suggests that Harrison should go live with Rita’s parents:

Debra: He could go live with Astor and Cody, with their grandparents in Orlando.

Dexter: I am a good father. I am the right person – the only person who can and should raise my son. Who, like me, lost his mother. [...]

Debra: You were too late for Rita.

Dexter: I should have killed Trinity the first time I saw him. That’s the mistake I made. [...] I will never, from this moment on, do you hear me? I will never ever make that mistake again.

Debra: It is not in your control.

Dexter: Everything is in my control. I am not giving up my son.

(7.4)

Dexter’s decisive denial of having his son raised by other people hints at his complete acceptance of his role as a father, which also establishes his identity as a full adult, having completed all five markers of adulthood with the birth of Harrison. The suggestions or doubts about whether he is capable of taking care of his boy also relate to the concerns of older asexual people who married and became parents before they started identifying as asexual, e.g. because they discovered the notion of asexuality later in life. As Decker states, “a parent coming out to their child could make the child feel their parent is naïve about sex-related issues that matter to them or that they aren’t really a respectable adult” (69). The pervasive stereotyping of asexuals as immature might indeed cause difficulties in the families of asexual parents.

In addition, Dexter adopts a paternal attitude towards young men who exhibit similar psychopathic or homicidal tendencies, which likely reinforces his sense of responsibility and reliability as a part of his masculine – and adult – identity. In season 6, he attempts to help Travis Marshall (Colin Hanks), who is later revealed to be the Domsday Killer as opposed to someone innocent that was being merely used by an older murderer. Before Dexter realizes this, he expresses the wish to help the younger man: “I’ve gotten Travis to trust me. In my own way, I’m going to eliminate a small bit of darkness and let some light in” (6.8). One episode later, Dexter even discusses the possibility of guiding Travis with Harry:

Harry: This isn’t just about Travis. You’re not that unselfish.

Dexter: I’m more than you ever thought I’d be.

Harry: So if you remove Travis' Dark Passenger, what are you getting out of this?

Dexter: Maybe I can learn to control my own. Maybe I can be a better...

Harry: A better what? A better person?

Dexter: I don't care about being a better person. It's too late for that. [...] A better father to my son. Is that so surprising to you? I want to be a better father for Harrison.

(6.9)

Through adopting a role of a father towards Travis, Dexter strives to become a better father to his own son. However, his role as a father figure is limited both with Travis, who is revealed as the killer instead of a young man requiring Dexter's help and guidance; and with Harrison when Dexter realizes the inherent limitations of the relationship between him and his son, preventing Dexter from revealing his true self to his child if he wishes for Harrison to have a better life (6.2). Dexter's fatherhood is fully realized with another young man with homicidal urges, Zach Hamilton (Sam Underwood).

Dexter meets Zach in the last season, when he suspects that Zach was the one to kill his father's lover. Dexter becomes determined to make Zach pay for his crime with his life, but during his investigation Dexter discovers the boy's fascination with blood at a crime scene and is reminded of himself at that age: "[Zach]'s drawn to blood, like me [...] I remember that feeling. Awe, wonder. It only fed the urge" (8.6). In addition, Dr. Vogel asks Dexter to spare Zach and reminds him that he would have been in a similar position without Harry's code:

Dexter: He's a killer. He deserves to die.

Vogel: Isn't that a little intolerant, coming from you?

Dexter: I don't kill innocent people.

Vogel: But you might have, if it hadn't been for Harry and me. You could even be on death row right now, huh? [...] But you were spared.

Dexter: Yeah, I was spared because of the code.

Vogel: That's an interesting idea. [...] What if we were to teach Zach the code?

(8.6)

While Dr. Vogel explicitly states that without Harry and her, Dexter would not have been spared from a death sentence, Dexter himself ascribes his survival to the impersonal idea of the code itself. Her suggestion that Zach could be taught Harry's rules appears to underscore the necessity for spiritual guidance. Dexter is reminded of the part that his father and Dr. Vogel played in the creation of his identity and the construction of his principles: if she calls herself his "spiritual mother" (8.2), then Harry

can undoubtedly be considered his spiritual father. This role appears to be related to three distinct levels of fatherhood, i.e. “the symbolic father, the imaginary father, and the real father” (B. Johnson 92). According to Johnson, the role of a symbolic father is “to regulate the desire of the son by imposing law upon the child [...] [and] to impose a healthy distance between mother and son” (92). Dexter understands that this is the role he is asked to accept with Zach, whose homicidal intentions are intended to symbolically avenge his mother for his father’s cheating. In Dexter’s case, the distance between mother and son has been achieved by Harry’s teachings, designed to manage Dexter’s urges, which arose due to his witnessing of his mother’s murder. Dexter is in this manner symbolically becoming Harry through his teaching of Zach, especially after Zach claims the identity of a monster for himself, i.e. demonstrates that he is in a similar mental space as Dexter has been throughout the show:

Zach: I can’t help it. It just builds up inside me, all these years. But Norma was the first time I ever followed through.
Dexter: And how was it, once you’d killed her?
Zach: It felt like this huge weight was lifted off my chest, this release of something horrible inside me.
Dexter: Like you were finally in control.
Zach: Yes. You should just go ahead and kill me. [...] if you don’t, I know I’ll do it again. I don’t want to be like this, but I can’t help it. I just am. I’m some kind of freak. A monster. [...]
Dexter: You never had a Harry. [...] Someone to talk to. Someone to teach you.
(8.6)

Dexter’s words bring into focus the role of a spiritual father as positioned above the role of a biological parent: Zach’s father is alive and present in his life, and yet Dexter acknowledges the necessity for a spiritual father, a ‘Harry’, in the boy’s life. Similarly, he ponders the limitations of his own fatherhood with Harrison: “There are parts of me that I can never share with my own son. But with Zach – could I teach him? Am I ready for this, to be a spiritual father?” (8.6). Through the comparison of biological and spiritual fatherhood, it becomes apparent that in *Dexter*, it is not necessarily the act of fathering a child in the biological sense that constitutes fatherhood: it is the guidance offered to a younger man with the goal of shaping another person into one’s own image, reinforcing one’s own masculine identity in the process. According to Blankenhorn, fatherhood, “more than any other male activity, helps men to become good men” (25). In addition, “as a social role, the deepest purpose of fatherhood is to socialize men by obligating them to their children. [...] More than any other cultural invention,

fatherhood guides men away from violence by fastening their behavior to a fundamental social purpose” (Blankenhorn 65). In view of these ideas, Dexter’s role as a biological father stands in contrast to his role of a spiritual one. While biological fatherhood does fulfill the purpose mentioned by Blankenhorn, distancing Dexter from violence in his wish to be a better father to Harrison, spiritual fatherhood pulls him back towards violence by positioning it as a social purpose that has to be passed down to a young boy, Zach. Dexter strives to become a better father, and by extension, a better man, through this role in both biological and spiritual sense, and confirms the theory presented by Dowd: that fatherhood might hold a greater developmental value for the adult than for the child (47).

Through his relationship with Zach, Dexter reveals that the role of a father as a factor in the construction of a masculine identity is available to asexual men, regardless of whether or not they adopt the role of a biological or spiritual father. Zach’s admiration and obedience becomes a source of validation of Dexter’s masculinity, and so does Harrison’s dependence on his care and protection. Biological fatherhood might be less accessible to asexual men who are unwilling to engage in heterosexual intercourse for conception, and Decker reports that there have been cases of adoption being denied to some asexual couples due to the prejudice of the social worker handling their cases (58). Nonetheless, Dexter’s approach towards Zach exposes that fatherhood might be manifested to a certain extent through spiritual guidance, also available to asexual men.

The notion of responsibility becomes a crucial factor in Dexter’s masculine identity and in the portrayal of him as an adult. Throughout the show, he shifts the responsibility for his killing onto an imaginary figure of the Dark Passenger, a personified darkness which Dexter subconsciously detaches from his identity. He first mentions it in season 1, when he remembers his mother’s murder and attempts to disassociate from the effect that witnessing this event has had on his development: “I saw my mother’s death. A buried memory, forgotten all these years. It climbed inside me that day. And it’s been with me ever since. My Dark Passenger” (1.11). In this episode, Dexter believes that the Dark Passenger possessed him the day his mother was murdered – words that are later revealed to be a misunderstanding of Harry’s assessment of Dexter’s mental health (7.10). Dexter calls the Dark Passenger a “roommate” (4.5) and shifts the responsibility for his actions onto this imaginary figure:

Dexter: I have to be the one to kill [Arthur]. I have to know he's gone. For my family.

Harry: Exactly. You can't think clearly because of them. They've done this to you.

Dexter: No, my Dark Passenger has done this to me. It's ruining my life.

Harry: It is your life.

Dexter: I don't want it to be. I don't want it.

(4.12)

Because Dexter does not want his life to be shaped by his homicidal urges, he disassociates from them and refuses to take full responsibility for his decisions in the early seasons. When he thinks about fully committing to building a family with Rita, he conceals his doubts in his inner monologue, incapable of articulating his own responsibility for his choices:

I wonder if Rita's looking at this same moon at this same moment. I like that. Connected by light. The Dark Passenger's been fighting against it, trying to keep me all to himself. But it's my turn now to get what I want. To embrace my family. And maybe one day not so long from now, I'll be rid of the Dark Passenger.

(4.12)

Dexter becomes capable of admitting responsibility only after initiating a successful relationship with Hannah. As analyzed in section 5.1, Dexter attempts to refigure himself through his romantic and sexual relationships with women. Hannah initiates this refiguring through questioning the existence of the Dark Passenger:

Dexter: As much as I want to be here with you, my Dark Passenger really wants to be somewhere else. I'm sorry.

Hannah: Your Dark what?

Dexter: My Dark Passenger. That's what I call my need to kill.

Hannah: Why?

Dexter: Because it's like this thing living inside me, telling me what to do, saying I have to kill, not leaving me any choice.

Hannah: You're not a puppet. Of course you have a choice.

Dexter: Actually, I don't.

Hannah: Come on, Dex. It's just you. You're the one who wants the arsonist dead. And I don't blame you. Who wouldn't?

(7.10)

Hannah's refusal to believe in the existence of a separate entity in Dexter's mind that is urging him to kill results in his doubts about the Dark Passenger. His adherence to the notion is once again connected to Harry's teachings. Nevertheless, Dexter realizes that Harry has not led him to believe that the Dark Passenger existed:

Harry: The Dark Passenger was all yours.
Dexter: You said it got into me too early, in that shipping container. Like you thought I was possessed.
Harry: I meant you were traumatized, Dexter. Not possessed. I remember the first time you said it. You must have been about twelve. I just let it go. I couldn't let you blame yourself for feelings that were too complicated for a young boy to understand. But you're not a boy anymore.
Dexter: You sound like Hannah.
Harry: Maybe she's right. Maybe the Dark Passenger is just a feeling.
Dexter: It can't be.
Harry: Why?
Dexter: Because if there's no Dark Passenger, then I'm responsible for everything I've done.
Harry: It sure is a whole lot simpler to just pin all the blame on something else, isn't it, Dexter?

(7.10)

Harry's – and by extension, Dexter's – thoughts in this episode exemplify the strong connection which responsibility holds to the idea of a masculine identity, or rather, the identity of an adult man. Dexter believes that Harry could not let him feel responsibility for his homicidal urges or actions because he was a boy, not a man. If he is not a boy anymore, a state he has achieved through the role of a father and a romantic and sexual partner, he has to reconsider his understanding of himself. At the end of the episode, Dexter fully embraces responsibility for his actions and the idea of independent choice when he kills Hannah's father Clint (Jim Beaver) as punishment for blackmail and acknowledges the deed as his own choice (7.10). In taking responsibility for his actions, Dexter reinforces his identity as an adult man and detaches himself from the expectations and rules of his father. Dexter fully comes into the realization that his choices are his own responsibility: "The Dark Passenger has been with me ever since I can remember, pulling the strings, running the show. But as it turns out, I'm no puppet" (7.10). This is a marked difference from Dexter's previous thoughts, where he adopted a fatalistic approach to his own decisions: "Harry was right. I thought I could change what I am [...] but it doesn't matter what I do, what I choose. I'm what's wrong. This is fate" (4.12). Reaching the stage of maturity where he is capable of responsibility for his own actions appears to be the result of Dexter's relationship with Hannah: in the earlier seasons, Dexter frequently takes responsibility for other people's lives or well-being, e.g. his son Harrison, Debra, or Lumen, as a way of coping with the events in his life. In his dialogue with Harry, it is revealed that Dexter copes through assuming responsibility for others, i.e. constructing his identity on the basis of being reliable: "I'm not just

saying this for the sake of the kids, Dex, but for you. They're not only your responsibility. They're your salvation" (5.2). However, Dexter still delegates the blame for his homicidal feelings and actions to the Dark Passenger, and only becomes capable of erasing this imaginary persona in season 7, after Hannah validates his identity as a man capable of his own choices. Her role in his changed approach to responsibility once again brings into focus the importance of sexual and romantic relationships to the healthy, adult life, according to the societal expectations previously discussed in section 5.1.

In conclusion, the 'sturdy oak' rule manifests in Dexter predominantly through the idea of stoicism, i.e. control of emotional responses. Asexual men might encounter difficulties while incorporating the 'sturdy oak' principles due to the prejudice about asexuals as incapable of emotions. In addition, Dexter is often depicted thinking of himself as monstrous or inhuman, which closely relates to the perception of asexual people, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4. Romantic and sexual relationships are once again presented as holding curative power over this inhumanity and emotionlessness, playing into the misconception that if asexuals attempt to become sexual, they will become capable of real emotions and, by extension, they will become healthy adults. Asexuals are also frequently portrayed as lonely people, and this loneliness is one of the important factors of Dexter's personality. He is only allowed to overcome this by establishing close personal bonds and sexual relationships. Asexual men might also relate to Dexter's fears of being revealed as abnormal or monstrous, and the necessity to perform normalcy and heterosexuality. He builds his masculinity on the basis of self-reliance as well, and strives to divorce his identity from the expectations and roles his father has imposed on him. Furthermore, the depiction of self-reliance and reliability in *Dexter* reveal these aspects as crucial to the creation and reinforcement of masculine identities, to the point where men might deliberately or subconsciously attempt to make people depend on them, or at least allow for this dependence in order to be validated as reliable, i.e. masculine.

5.4 'Give 'Em Hell'

The fourth rule of masculinity as explored by Kimmel refers to the necessity of risk-taking as well as exuding the air of daring, violence and aggression (*The History* 94). Men are encouraged to behave violently in order to prove their masculinity: according to Kimmel and Aronson, "violence has long been understood as the best way to ensure

that others recognize one's manhood publicly. Fighting was culturally prescribed for boys, who needed to demonstrate gender identity. [...] Lurking beneath such advice was the fear that boys who were not violent were not men at all" (811). The pervasive idea that violence is a necessary factor of masculinities could shape the behavior of asexual men, who might adopt violence as an available means to the creation of their masculinities.

In Dexter's case, it could be argued that violence is restricted to privacy, almost to secrecy, and fails to fulfill the goal of publicly confirming the character's masculinity. On the other hand, Dexter has witnesses for his demonstrations of violence: his victims, his occasional allies or accomplices, and by extension, the actual audience of the show. In addition, he forms relationships based on violence with friends as well as romantic and sexual partners. He demonstrates his masculinity in the most violent way imaginable – murder – and does so from a very young age. For instance, he recalls killing dogs in his childhood, as well as hunting deer with his father, who was attempting to control his urges this way (1.1; 1.3). It becomes a point of discussion on the show that Harry never attempted to suppress Dexter's violence completely. Instead, the father figure becomes complicit in the son's violence by teaching him that "if justice cannot be served in the court of law, then, at least, it can find a home in the court of Dexter" (Howard 67).

Violence as a form of bonding becomes a recurrent theme on *Dexter*. The familial bonds with Harry and Debra are already a result of violence, i.e. the murder of his mother. Harry decided to adopt the little boy he found at a crime scene, and Dexter's childhood, as well as the relationship with his father and sister, has been influenced by his own violent inclinations. The first real bond the protagonist appears to form on the show, aside from Harry and Debra, is his biological brother Brian, who also happens to be the first person aside from Harry to see Dexter's real self: "but unlike Harry, Brian is far from disturbed by what he finds. He embraces Dexter's true nature and encourages him to embrace it, too. For the first time, Dexter feels accepted for what and who he really is" (Boyle 97). Brian encourages Dexter's true nature and offers the possibility of freedom without regret. He even mocks Harry's code and tells Dexter that he should not limit his life based on his adoptive father's rules (1.12). Brian offers his assistance in helping Dexter construct a new identity for himself, a new masculinity that would incorporate freedom – and violence – without regrets. Asexual people might easily relate to the lure of 'being himself' which Brian represents, especially considering that

many bonding activities of young men center around sex (Przybylo, "Masculine Doubt" 229). The danger of Dexter's asexuality being linked to his psychopathy, i.e. to his violence, lies in the possibility that young asexual men, seeking role models for their behavior, might adopt violence as a potential replacement of the sexually-themed activities.

Dexter's romantic relationships are also strongly influenced by violence. His first romance is with Rita, a woman who has suffered abuse at the hand of her ex-husband, and this experience makes Dexter view her as compatible, predominantly due to her avoidance of sex (1.1). Later, he refuses to let Rita see his real self and seeks acceptance in Lila, who is revealed as a psychopath as well and is not only accepting of Dexter's Dark Passenger, but capable of extreme violence to attain her goals. Most notably, he establishes his relationship with Lumen and later Hannah through direct confrontation with his violent side. After saving Lumen, they first bond over displays of violence: Dexter shows her the barrels of dead girls in formaldehyde solution in order to make her understand what he saved her from. He also gives Lumen his own knife which she uses to cut him, establishing that she is capable of violence as well (5.4). Furthermore, she requests his help with revenge against her rapists, and their relationship changes from friendly to sexual after they share the experience of a kill (5.10). After Lumen's vengeance plot is finished, her propensity for violence disappears and their relationship ends with her leaving (5.12). Similarly, with Hannah, violence is the inhibitor for the beginning of a sexual relationship: in fact, Dexter wants to kill Hannah at first (7.6). Once she is on his table and fearlessly tells him to do what he has to do, Dexter lets her go and attempts to connect with her through a sexual relationship, demonstrating his need for emotional connection and complete acceptance by another person. Hannah, a woman who has poisoned several people, is also the person with whom Dexter forms a lasting and genuine relationship, even though it is based on the mutual acceptance of the other's violent behavior. The romantic and sexual relationship is thus presented as crucial to Dexter's development and to his sense of stability and contentment: while violence is obviously presented as available even to asexual men, *Dexter* once again offers the idea that a person can only reach full contentment with their life once they have successfully established a romantic and sexual relationship.

Violence is also directly connected to Dexter's performance of the risk-taking factor of the 'give 'em hell' rule. Dexter's risks frequently take the form of rebellion against the 'don't get caught' rule of Harry's code. While Dexter does not consciously

attempt to be captured while murdering someone, his choice of victims and the execution of his plans are often so daring they border on risky. For instance, after Rita's death, Dexter wants to kill an animal pick-up worker in broad daylight:

Harry: You're gonna kill him in daylight?

Dexter: Doesn't matter out this far.

Harry: It's still very risky. What if someone comes by? [...] You have to do this right, Dexter. [...] It's your first kill since [Rita's death].

Dexter: You don't have to tell me how much I need this.

Harry: That's the problem. [...] This kill won't put everything right. It won't bring Rita back.

Dexter: It might bring *me* back.

(5.3)

Dexter is taking a calculated risk in setting up his kill for daytime. From his dialogue with Harry, it seems that Dexter is using risk as a way of taking control of his life. He also articulates his relationships with women in terms of risk-taking: "Sometimes, you just have to take a risk. After all, isn't that what relationships are all about?" (1.5). Sex is discussed in a similar manner when Dexter admits to himself that he does not want to engage in sexual activities for fear of his partner seeing him as emotionally empty (1.8). Overcoming the odds and proving that he can take a risk without failing to complete the task, whether it is murder or a relationship, holds the potential to 'bring Dexter back', i.e. to reestablish his sense of security in his own abilities, his confidence, and through it, his masculinity.

Another factor in the creation of masculine identity is rebellious behavior. Men are encouraged not to conform to the rules and defy authority (Harris 142). As Kimmel states, men should "pay no attention to what others think" (*Guyland* 94). In addition, defying the rules set by parental figures constitutes an important part of reaching maturity: "adolescents have been 'proving' their independence with rebellion against their parents' values for generations" (Kimmel, *Guyland* 150). In this regard, rebellion can also be understood as a symbolical defiance against authority figures and a factor which asexual men might strive to employ in order to escape the stereotypical view of asexuals as inherently immature or childish.

Dexter performs this rebellion on two levels: the first being his struggle with Harry as an authority figure. In nearly every season, Dexter's thoughts shift between full acceptance of and adherence to Harry's code and his perception of Dexter as a person, and the attempts to create a new identity for himself. Dexter acknowledges that

Harry was not infallible in season 1, when he breaks into Paul's apartment despite knowing that Paul does not meet Harry's code: "Harry didn't believe in preemptive killing but maybe I can bend the rules just this once. After all, Harry wasn't perfect, he lied about my birth father" (1.10). Later on, Dexter decides that he needs to establish his own identity without overt reliance on Harry's beliefs:

The code is mine now, and mine alone. So too are the relationships I cultivate. [...] My father might not approve, but I'm no longer his disciple. I'm a master now, an idea transcended into life. And so this is my new path, which is a lot like the old one, only mine. To stay on that path, I need to work harder, explore new rituals, evolve.

(2.12)

This evolution takes place throughout the whole show, with Dexter repeatedly discarding and accepting Harry's beliefs and rules as formative.

The second level of Dexter's rebellion reflects the image of a rebel as a fighter against injustice (Harris 142). The term *injustice* can be explained from a personal as well as legal standpoint, it is possible to align Dexter with both. The code that Dexter follows prescribes the killing of people who deserve to die. Through murder, he is rebelling against the legal system that he perceives as dysfunctional: "Most normal people enjoy a sacred pact with society: Live a good life and society will take care of you. But if society drops the ball then someone else has to pick up the slack" (3.1). With the popular mistrust towards system of the US among its citizens, this likely endears him to the audience when he assumes the position of a vigilante keeper of peace and the protector, or avenger, of the weak: after all, "the mythology of the [United States] as expressed in its popular culture abounds with tales of men who, when faced with evildoers wrapped in the protection afforded by a weak or corrupt legal system, take justice into their own hands" (Beeler 221). But Dexter's motivations are inherently selfish: to satisfy his homicidal urges, not to be just. Beeler likens Dexter to popular vigilante figures such as Batman or the Lone Ranger, but Dexter's difference from the other vigilante heroes is crucial: "unlike these popular-culture antecedents, Dexter needs to act in order to satisfy his own desire for murder. It is the highly personalized nature of Dexter's desire to kill that makes him such an unusual commentary upon the pop-culture avenger" (Beeler 229). This unusual drive behind the protagonist's vigilantism might be potentially explained through the urge to over-emphasize violence to reinforce his masculinity. Where sexual aggression becomes unavailable to the character due to

his disinterest, violence takes place of the crucial factor in the creation of a masculine identity.

Regardless of the motivation beyond Dexter's deeds, justice was one of the primary reasons for his 'creation':

Harry's motivation for training Dexter is based on more than love alone. He is not just interested in keeping Dexter alive. The other part of his plan involves raising someone who can address those injustices in the world, to solve those crimes and punish those evil-doers, to accomplish beyond the law what Harry himself could not accomplish within it.

(Howard 64)

Dexter's rebellion against his father's rules can be observed also in his active obstruction of police investigation, the exact thing which Harry wanted to alleviate by teaching his son to murder only those who have escaped the legal system. Regardless of his father's wishes, Dexter deliberately keeps information away from the police in order to be the first one to catch the perpetrator and murder him. Dexter's disregard for the code as well as against the legal system ends at the end of the last season. He stops defying the legal system when he walks away from Dr. Vogel's son without killing him, and instead leaves him tied to a table so that Debra, as a representative of the police, can arrest him (8.11). Dexter also once again accepts the idea ingrained in him by Harry: that he is incapable of being in a close relationship with Hannah, or Harrison, without destroying them, and he needs to leave them alone (8.12). Rebellion becomes essential to Dexter's path of self-discovery and the rebuilding of his identity, even though he appears to adopt Harry's rules eventually. Interestingly, Beeler explains Dexter's dilemma as follows: "the evil that Dexter must battle is internal as well as external. In the beginning of the series, Dexter is revealed [to be] a garden variety psychopathic mass-murderer. He does not appear to have real emotions; he simply imitates the actions of others in emotional situations" (230). Once again, emotionlessness is understood not only as atypical, but as evil. In the end, homicidal urges are not the tendencies Dexter must overcome in order to be perceived as more human. His humanization stems from his sexual and romantic relationship with several women, predominantly Hannah McKay, despite the fact that Dexter continues to kill almost to the very end of the last season. He might rebel against the legal system and against his father's teachings, but he cannot successfully defy the pressure of a heteronormative

society. If he wishes to attain a fully adult and moderately healthy masculine identity, he must conform and establish a meaningful romantic and sexual relationship.

To conclude, Dexter's adherence to the 'give 'em hell' rule manifests mostly through his use of violence, a factor available to asexual men as well. The most significant bonds he forms with other people are also based on violence. Friendships, as well as most of his romantic and sexual relationships, are established through the sharing of violent experiences or homicidal urges, and full acceptance of him as a violent man. However, the construction and maintaining of romantic and sexual relationships still seem to play a significant role in his approach to other aspects of a masculine identity. His father's teachings become the basis for his rebellion. Dexter both struggles against Harry's rules and utilizes them in order to rebel against the legal system. However, he is ultimately unable to successfully revolt against the heteronormative order of the society, and his humanization stems from his romantic and sexual relationship with the women in his life.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis aimed to provide answers to the research questions indicated in the Introduction: Do asexual men face more difficulty in constructing their masculine identities than non-asexual men? Do asexual men excessively employ those aspects of masculine identities that are not connected to sexuality to construct or reaffirm their masculinities, or do they perform heterosexuality in order to do so? Does television fiction of the 21st century offer asexual men role models for the creation of masculine identities? Selected theories on masculinity and asexuality were employed in the analysis of the two television shows, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) and *Dexter* (2006-2013), to try and respond to them.

The theoretical part of the thesis was divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 presented the theoretical framework available for discussing asexuality as a sexual orientation, providing a short overview of the history of sexology with focus on those sources which directly or indirectly mentioned asexuality. The works of Anthony Bogaert, Ela Przybylo and other significant researchers in the field of asexuality studies were introduced. In Chapter 2, current debates on both asexuality and masculinity were explored, providing key terms and concepts, as well as the state of the question in both respective fields of interest. Chapter 3 presented the portrayal of asexual people in the US media to date, bringing into focus the necessity of exploring asexuality in contemporary television fiction.

The analytical part comprised Chapter 4 on *The Big Bang Theory*, and Chapter 5 on *Dexter*. The two series have been selected for their portrayal of potentially asexual male characters, as well as for their difference in genre, which allowed for a broader view of the representation of asexuality in contemporary US television. The analysis was based on the four basic rules of masculinity as described by Kimmel (*Guyland*), and attempted to answer the research questions posed in the Introduction through examining how these rules were applied in the creation of asexual masculinities in the characters of Sheldon Cooper (*TBBT*) and Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*).

The first rule of masculinity, ‘no sissy stuff’, dealt with the importance of men distancing themselves from femininity, predominantly through homophobia, misogyny and sexism. All of these factors were utilized in *TBBT*, while homophobia was notably absent from *Dexter*. Sheldon Cooper actively exhibited misogynistic and sexist attitudes, at times in significantly exaggerated ways, whereas Dexter Morgan displayed

complicity with other men's sexist remarks. The behavior of both characters appeared to be connected to the establishment or reinforcement of male friendships, which suggested that asexual men might experience peer pressure to either actively perform misogyny and sexism, or at least become complicit in other men's misogynistic and sexist behavior in order to be perceived as normal. The analysis of these shows also revealed that asexuality, particularly if perceived through the lens of common stereotypes, could become an obstacle in the creation of healthy, adult masculinities. In *TBBT*, Sheldon struggled with being perceived as immature and child-like, which was introduced as a common stereotype about asexuals in Chapters 2 and 3. In addition, Sheldon was often called alien or robot-like, and this dehumanization coincided with Dexter's rhetoric of himself as an inhuman monster. Asexuality was consistently linked with pathology, since Sheldon exhibited undeniable signs of a condition on the autism spectrum, while Dexter was confirmed to be a psychopath. In both cases, asexuality was portrayed as a symptom of their eccentricity or mental health condition, and as an affliction curable through a romantic and sexual relationship with a woman. If sex is regarded as a requirement for attaining the status of a healthy, adult man, asexual masculinities attain an ultimately subordinate status, as opposed to non-asexual masculinities.

The second rule of masculinity emphasized the necessity of power, success, and status for the creation of masculine identities. The notion of dominance was explored, and the theory on geek masculinities was applied, since both characters could fit into the category of geeks due to their scientific backgrounds. Sheldon Cooper applied intellectual dominance to a far greater extent than physical dominance, whereas Dexter Morgan appeared to rely on physical violence to a slightly greater degree. However, both protagonists exhibited excessively dominant behavior in certain situations, Sheldon through his obsession with retaining the physical spaces he has claimed for himself, and Dexter in his use of violence as a tool for domination over others. While sexual power might be largely inaccessible to asexual men, it has been revealed that it was possible for an asexual man to achieve greater social status through the assumptions of other men about one's sexual activities. For this reason, asexual men might feel the pressure to perform heterosexuality in order to achieve admiration and approval of other men, and thus elevate their status in their peer group.

The third rule, 'be a sturdy oak', focused on the aspects of reliability, self-reliance, and emotionlessness. The latter related to the stereotypes of asexuality as

emotionally cold. For this reason, asexual men might face more difficulties in constructing their masculine identities, since adherence to the emotionless factor of masculinity reinforces the negative stereotypes about asexuality. Furthermore, the lack of emotions in both *TBBT* and *Dexter* was linked to pathology, i.e. autism and psychopathy, respectively. Since both Sheldon and Dexter were shown as improved in their ability to recognize and experience emotions after they established a long-term romantic and sexual relationship, the stereotype of the curative power of sex was reinforced in both shows. The notion of responsibility was addressed in both shows as well: Sheldon was shown as lacking self-reliance and reliability, and Dexter's responsibility was addressed primarily through the concept of fatherhood. The portrayal of the importance of sexual relationships might negatively impact the creation of asexual masculinities, since these relationships might be undesirable or unavailable for some asexual men.

The final rule of masculinity, 'give 'em hell', emphasized the concepts of confidence, toughness, violence, and rebellion. Confidence was present in both analyzed characters, but in the case of Sheldon, it was often exaggerated and embodied a source of humor, since it was frequently unfounded on his true abilities. In comparison, Dexter's confidence was presented as adequate, and primarily related to violence. Similarly, competitiveness was an exaggerated trait in Sheldon, which could be related to the difference in genres and to exaggeration as a general source of humor in comedy shows. However, Sheldon's extreme competitiveness and absolute inability to accept defeat could also be understood as overcompensation, i.e. excessive employment of those factors of masculinity which are mostly disconnected from sexuality. Additionally, Sheldon's asexuality was also presented as a source of humor, which could negatively impact the ability of asexual men to employ Sheldon as a valid role model for the creation of their masculinities. Similarly, Dexter's excessive employment of violence makes this character potentially unavailable as a role model for asexual viewers. Rebellion was utilized in both characters on a personal level, with Sheldon revolting predominantly against perceived injustice against himself, and with Dexter's rebellion against the rules of his adoptive father. However, Dexter's vigilantism and circumvention of proper law enforcement procedures also positioned him as a rebel against the flawed legal system. In addition, rebellion was relevant both to Sheldon and Dexter through the category of geek masculinities, which have been understood as a certain form of revolt against the mainstream culture in the past, and asexuality, which

has been discussed in terms of radicalization and politicization of this orientation as subversive in relation to the hypersexualized heteronormative society. Rebellion might thus become an important factor in the creation of masculine asexual identities, even though some asexual men might not wish to perceive their sexual orientation as politicized or radicalized rebellion against the society.

The examination of both comedy and drama in contemporary American television has revealed that asexual men might experience more difficulties in the creation of their masculine identities than non-asexual men, due to the prejudice against asexuals as emotionless, humorless, inhuman, or unhealthy and curable. Societal pressure might force asexual men to excessively employ those aspects of masculine identities that are not connected to sexuality to construct or reaffirm their masculinities, as well as to perform heterosexuality in order to be perceived as normal, healthy, fully adult and masculine. Asexual men might attain either the status of subordinate masculinities, when they fail to perform heterosexuality to the satisfaction of other men, or participate in complicity. The analysis of *The Big Bang Theory* and *Dexter* did not yield satisfactory results in the search for role models which asexual men might employ in the creation of their masculine identities: the emphasis on the curative powers of sexual relationships and the inherent unhealthiness of asexuality prevented the classification of either Sheldon or Dexter as successful examples of well-adjusted and content asexual characters.

However, these findings are limited by the number of asexual characters in contemporary television available for analysis. Future appearance of more asexual male characters on television, as well as the potential evolution of the factors available for the creation of masculine identities, will provide useful basis for further research into the topic. Additional results might be achieved through the comparison of these findings with the experience and opinions of asexual audiences. With the rising visibility of asexuality and a growing interest in the orientation as a research subject, it might be possible in the future to utilize Internet communities as well as new research into asexual masculinities to expand on this research.

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