

Straight as an Aro: Aromantic Asexual Representation in *Riverdale*

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Introduction: The Name of Our Town is *Riverdale*

“You just don’t get it ‘cause you’re asexual,” said Archie to Jughead Jones in the 2015 comic *Jughead*. This comic issue, written by Chip Zdarsky, confirmed what many people had been hoping for after decades of characterization and hinting: Jughead Jones is asexual (commonly referred to as “ace”), meaning he feels little to no sexual attraction to people. After years of comments about not being interested in girls or relationships, and being physically attracted to anyone, the comics finally solidified his identity. In addition to his asexuality, Jughead has been written as seemingly aromantic (commonly referred to as “aro”), meaning he feels little to no romantic attraction to people, and it’s something Zdarsky confirmed on Twitter in 2017 (qtd. in forsthyelovesfood). Zdarsky explained, “Something like asexuality is underrepresented, and since we have a character who was asexual before people had the word for it, I’m continuing to write him that way” (qtd. in Melrose). I was excited to hear that Jughead was asexual even before people knew what asexuality really was, and I thought that it was a show of good faith to confirm something important to many readers. Zdarsky also said, “People have asked me if there is going to be a romance if I’m writing Jughead...and the answer is no, because there is enough of that in Archie” (qtd. in Melrose). This confirms his words on Twitter, though the tweet was recently deleted (which I realize means we should probably not take the tweet too seriously). Jughead’s asexuality and aromanticism were defining characteristics in the comics next to his cynical wit, his love for food, and his role as Archie’s best friend.

In 2017, the CW Television Network released *Riverdale*, a TV adaptation of the *Archie* comics. The show takes many liberties and greatly deviates from the source material; however, I noticed that one thing stands out: Jughead is not aromantic or asexual. In season one, episode five, Jughead and longtime friend Betty Cooper check each other out, kiss in episode six, and are referred to as dating by episode eight. Their relationship continues throughout season one, which ends by exchanging “I love you”s, survives a few break-ups in season two, in which they also become sexually active, and prevails throughout the events of season three, which is currently ongoing. Cole Sprouse, the actor who plays Jughead, commented that *Riverdale* is a new universe (ColeMSprouse), and Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, the creator of the show, implied that the events in the show will affect how Jughead identifies (qtd. in Alexander). While they aren’t wrong, there is something to be said about the nature of changing a character’s LGBTQ+ identity to non-LGBTQ+. I see this as blatant queer erasure, and for one of the few unquestionably aromantic asexual characters to not have that identity is confusing and, quite frankly, insulting.

I look to explore how *Riverdale’s* depiction of Jughead’s queer identity reflects society’s current attitude toward aromantic asexuals and the potential issues due to the disparity between the source comics and the adaptation. I plan to compare the conversation surrounding *Riverdale’s* Jughead and LGBTQ+ identity with the existing scholarly conversation on the well-known LGBT identities. First, I will establish the importance of representation and look at how the queer community has been represented historically. I will then look at asexuality and aromanticism and the unique experiences they face. Finally, I will address how Aguirre-Sacasa and Sprouse have been discussing Jughead’s identity in the show in relation to the scholarly conversation surrounding aromantic and asexual identities. I argue that the aromantic and asexual

identities, and largely the non-lesbian or gay LGBTQ+ identities, must first achieve acknowledgement in entertainment before they can be depicted in a more complex and realistic way.

Understanding LGBTQ+ Representation: We're Here, We're Queer

I'll start by explaining why representation in media is important, and specifically why LGBTQ+ representation is important. Thomas Crisp looked at award-winning children's nonfiction books for their influence on how young people understand the world; unfortunately, he found a severe lack of LGBTQ+ representation, as he noted erasure and implicit coding of queer characters. Nonfiction books are especially important because they hold the connotation of being objective and truthful. Children's books frame the way children understand the world as they are growing up, and the lack of representation only sends the message that certain groups of people don't exist in the real world. Michaela Meyer, a professor of media and cultural studies at Christopher Newport University, similarly expressed the importance of internet and pop culture as a factor of framing identity, and she stated that an inaccurate portrayal of queer identities in these media can be harmful. Today, the prominence of pop culture and technology make everything more accessible, and I can see how that ease of access makes everything more impactful simply because of the increased exposure. TV and film are becoming the new media that shape how kids understand the world. There is a psychology theory concerning how people form their identity: social identity theory. It states that "the portrayal or social perception of a group's behavior or attitudes can affect the individual sense of identity"; media, specifically, affects an individual's perception of norms and ultimately defines the status and standing of different groups (McKinley et al 1050-1). So, in addition to affecting identity formation, media and pop culture also create social norms and can ultimately validate an identity in the eyes of society. The application of social

identity theory to media representation is evident in a study by Bond and Compton, experts in media psychology and communication studies, who saw a positive relationship between gay representation in entertainment and support of gay rights (728-730). The mere representation of LGBTQ+ identities in entertainment helps to solidify and establish the legitimacy of queer identities to those not of the LGBTQ+ community.

Suzanna Danuta Walters, the director of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality studies at Northeastern University, claimed that gay and lesbian representation has come in three stages: the first was absence, coded, or stereotypes; the second brought queer people into a public spectacle; and the third (the current state of representation) gave us normalization, assimilation, and LGBTQ+ identity being cast aside or made insignificant (918). The first stage is evident in films with gay-coded villains because of the general lack of the "gay" or "lesbian" confirmations and also the use of gay stereotypes to signify villainous characters. For example, villains like Jafar (from *Aladdin*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker) and Hades (from *Hercules*, also directed by Ron Clements and John Musker) dress ambiguously, are generally more flamboyant, and overall have "feminine" aspects such as slender hands or makeup, which match with stereotypes about gay men. The second stage is seemingly better because gay and lesbians are given roles; however, they were correlated with disease, specifically HIV and AIDS. Walters also stated that the last stage (normalization, assimilation, and being cast aside) is evident in shows like *Modern Family*, where gay parenting is structured identically as heterosexual parenting. Despite the issues with the third stage of representation, it is a step toward better representation in comparison to the absence of queer representation.

Due to *Riverdale's* status as a popular television show, social identity theory can be applied to argue that *Riverdale* creates social norms that disregard aromanticism and asexuality. These social norms ultimately define the status of those identities, and by not

mentioning them at all, the show indicates that in the eyes of society, aromanticism and asexuality are not legitimate identities. The absence of aromantic and asexual characters in *Riverdale* indicates that the aro-ace community is experiencing the first stage of absent and coded representation.

Asexuality and Aromanticism: Hiding an Aro-Ace Up Your Sleeve

Identities not as prominent as lesbian and gay are often left out of the discussion, even though they face unique obstacles because of that identity. For example, bisexuality is frequently avoided in the debate for LGBTQ+ equality, is negatively depicted in entertainment, and sometimes, the word “bisexual” can’t even be used (Corey 201-203). This exclusion could be due to the idea of monosexuality (attraction to a single gender), which is the widely accepted form of attraction in society (Corey 201-203). I believe this exclusion can also be applied to asexuality, as both identities exist outside the boundaries of monosexuality and therefore face exclusion and erasure often.

Asexuality and aromanticism are also negatively-defined identities (NDI), meaning the identity revolves around the lack of something (Scott et al. 273). Asexuality’s status as an NDI could also explain why there is so little existing scholarly research surrounding asexuality, and by extension, aromanticism. The existing research seems to focus mostly on how prominent the identity is, but it does not seem to discuss how ace and aro people experience a different sort of discrimination than lesbian and gay individuals do. I can see how it might be harder to research people who are characterized by a lack of attraction, but there are unique sets of experiences that those groups still face. For example, aromanticism is really only discussed in relation to asexuality, but it’s important for me to clarify that being aro and being ace aren’t inherently related to each other. Asexual individuals don’t have to identify as aro, and aromantic people don’t have to identify as ace. As NDIs, aromanticism and asexuality become non-issues to certain

people, meaning there is little public discourse around that identity and coming out is “disregard[ed]...as an irrelevance” (Scott et al 278). This makes sense because it’s easier to ignore an identity that doesn’t violently oppose the societal norm of heterosexuality, but that actually adds to the evidence that aromanticism and asexuality are invisible identities. Arguably, aros and aces are stuck in Walter’s first stage of representation because of their status as an NDI, as it’s easier to gloss over a lack of attraction.

Although aromanticism and asexuality are invisible identities, they still live in a world with societal norms that deny their identity. In two of his studies, CJ DeLuzio Chasin, an expert in psychology, said that asexual individuals live in a sexualnormative society (“Making” 170). Phrases such as “You haven’t found the right person” and “You’re not old enough” exemplify how society expects everyone to have sex, and asexuality also has a history of being diagnosed as a disorder (Gupta 996). Sexualnormativity is especially seen in entertainment because media commonly normalizes sex, reinforcing its status as a societal norm. One of the participants of an asexuality study, Mark, said, “sex sells on television, commercials, television shows...It’s just—I feel like it’s everywhere” (qtd. in Gupta 998). These lived experiences make it harder for LGBTQ+ individuals to understand their identity, and the lack of representation in media doesn’t help.

Similar to sexualnormativity, aromantic individuals encounter amatonormativity, which is the existence of compulsory romance in society (Chasin, “Making sense”). Amatonormativity means that people who identify as aromantic often encounter phrases such as “You haven’t found the right person to date,” or “you’re not ready to commit to a relationship.” Additionally, living in society where the norm is to date, marry, and have children sends the message to aromantics that they don’t belong. I even see amatonormativity in scholarly research. For example, a common point of discussion in

asexuality research is that people who identify as asexual can still form meaningful relationships because sex is not a requirement to form a healthy relationship (Chasin, "Making" 176); however, this concept is harmful to aros because it implies that romantic relationships are more valuable than non-romantic relationships.

Aros and aces live in a society that places emphasis on things that they don't necessarily experience, which makes it easier for their identity to be forgotten, and aros and aces will likely find no representation in media. In a way, this is different than the experiences a lesbian or gay person might experience due to the nature of their identity. When asexuality is represented, it is often done in a way that's harmful to aromantic individuals because a large part of the discussion "prominently asserts the significance of relationships in asexual people's lives" (Chasin, "Making" 176). Essentially, asexuality is often defined as "okay" because amatonormative tendencies are still present, which invalidates individuals who also identify as aromantic. Aro-ace individuals face a specific set of obstacles in a world that is both sexualnormative and amatonormative.

Returning to *Riverdale*: Origin Stories

Returning to *Riverdale*, I hope it is now clear why Jughead's aromantic asexual identity in the comics is a big deal. Representation greatly affects an individual's sense of identity, and to many people, Jughead is one of the only well-known characters that can be reliably confirmed as aromantic and asexual (Wheeler). For one of the writers of the comic to confirm that Jughead was asexual meant a lot to people, especially given the difficulty society has with using an LGBTQ+ person's chosen label. *Riverdale's* denial of Jughead's unquestionable aroace identity puts aromantic and asexual representation into Walter's first stage instead of the third stage with the lesbian and gay community.

Riverdale doesn't even acknowledge Jughead's asexuality. It was only officially confirmed in 2015 by Zdarsky, but the writers of the comics have continued to portray

him as ace and heavily code him as aro. For example, in *Jughead* issue #9, written by Ryan North, Jughead states, "I don't get crushes... it's a friendship crush, if anything." This is remarkably similar to how some people on the aromantic or asexual spectrum describe attraction: non-romantic crushes or relationships that aren't inherently romantic but still emotionally intimate. In comparison, *Riverdale's* Jughead initiated the relationship between him and Betty in season one, episode six. Within the same issue, Jughead fantasized about marrying a burger instead of a girl, and commented on being crazy for not wanting to kiss people (North). Again, this is representative of how aromantic and asexual people "[challenge] the idea that it is necessary to have a sexual or romantic partnership to enjoy a complete and fulfilling life" by valuing non-romantic relationships (Gupta 1005). I don't think that the aromantic coding is just that Jughead fantasizes about marrying a burger (and not a girl), but also that he explicitly doesn't want to kiss people. Not wanting to kiss people says more about his LGBTQ+ identity because it is characteristic of a big portion of the aromantic community. Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence is that in *Jughead* issue #11, Jughead says, "I don't go on dates, Sabrina. I don't like people that way, you know?" (North). To me, this sounds like Jughead is very obviously stating that he doesn't feel romantic attraction.

Despite the recency of Jughead's asexuality confirmation and aromantic coding, it has been going on for ages. There have been plenty of instances in which he was shown to be averse to women, dating, and love, often comically substituting food for a love-interest in comic panels. For example, 1950s comic artist Samm Schwartz often featured Jughead, who fantasized about food, and Archie, who fantasized about dates with girls on the covers of *Archie's Pal Jughead Annual* issues. Jughead's placement next to Archie, who is always thinking about girls and dating, emphasizes Jughead's lack of attraction. Jughead got his own spinoff comics titled *Jughead* in 1949, but even as early as that, he was not

interested in dating. Issue #4 of *Jughead* (Frese), published in 1954, depicts him as focused only on food, brushing off his companion, who comments on the romantic setting. It is evident in other comic covers from as early as 1949 that Jughead has always been averse to kissing (Archie Comics), and the fact that Jughead has always been written this way reinforces the claim that he is aromantic.

After establishing that Jughead is unquestionably aromantic and asexual in the comic, I can't help but question why his LGBTQ+ identity was erased in the TV adaptation. As I mentioned earlier, Cole Sprouse in a verified Reddit Ask Me Anything stated that *Riverdale* is a different universe than the comics; many people, including *Riverdale* creator Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, seem to use the same reasoning as an excuse to take liberties with a character's queer identity. Although this isn't necessarily a banned action, their intentions become gray given that Sprouse also said, "there's also quite a large community of avid 'Archie' fans that want Betty and Jughead to be together, too. I think these are things we need to juggle when considering what Jughead is in [*Riverdale*]" (qtd. in Damore). He implies that changing Jughead's queer identity to be seen as straight is justified to boost viewership, which is concerning. To individuals who have read the *Archie* comic and identify with Jughead as aro-ace, sacrificing an LGBTQ+ character to make him straight for the sake of viewership in an amatonormative society also sends the message that their identity isn't worth anything.

Aguirre-Sacasa and Sprouse have also made statements about *Riverdale* as an origin story, meaning that the first few seasons will act as an instigator of the main plot and as motivation for the character's actions. Sprouse said to *Teen Vogue*, "because of the fluidity of sexuality and how oftentimes a person discovers who they are after a series of events – like those told in our origin stories – this is an ongoing conversation" (qtd. in Elizabeth). Sprouse isn't wrong, and he acknowledges that sexuality is fluid, though he

also stated that Jughead's asexuality is a choice (ColeMSprouse). The issue here is that the idea of an origin story has a certain connotation to it: something specific, usually tragic in nature and out of the character's control, must trigger the character's main motivations. When saying that the show starts as an origin story for someone's sexuality, it implies that a series of tragic events must take place for that character to realize or become their queer identity. That's not always how it works, but for *Riverdale* to represent it as such correlates LGBTQ+ identities to tragedy to fully become their identity. Chasin said that when asexuality was represented in media, it seemed to fall into two categories: "asexuals who have been without sexual desire and who are therefore happily free of sexual desire" and "non-asexual people who, for some reason, lose sexual desire and are therefore in distress" (Chasin, "Reconsidering" 409). *Riverdale* as an origin story falls into the second category and implies that asexuality is not something to be happy about but rather a consequence of a traumatizing event.

Aguirre-Sacasa also said, "the kids are discovering themselves, and a big part of that is discovering their sexuality...we're not going to start with Archie's band or Jughead's asexuality or any of the things that have become canon — those are all stops on the way to [catching] up to 75 years of Archie history" (qtd. in Alexander). I understand that this is how life works; sometimes people do have to experience things before choosing to label themselves as queer. I want to make the distinction here that the choice is in labeling themselves, not in choosing to be queer. Although building up to the canon aspects of *Archie* makes sense, I've shown that Jughead has been written as aromantic and asexual for decades. There is no origin story for the show to tell because Jughead was simply never interested in relationships or girls.

To return to my claim that *Riverdale* indicates that aro-ace representation is in Walter's first stage, the absence of Jughead's aro-ace identity is evidence of that. The 2015

Jughead comics pushed this representation into the second stage, where queer representation is a public spectacle, but they never would have gotten there without first depicting his aro-ace identity as a non-issue in the earlier comics. I think it's interesting that being a non-issue is indicative of invisible identities, but in entertainment, making an LGBTQ+ identity a non-issue is a blessing. In fact, being a non-issue in entertainment has a completely new connotation. By portraying a character's aro-ace identity as a non-issue, there is simply nothing for viewers to be upset about. The character's queer identity doesn't have to be a source of tragic-backstory, an essential plot point, or a controversial source of character motivation, but rather it is something that is inherently there. By depicting the character as completely content with their identity, entertainment can reinforce the legitimacy and normalcy of aro-ace identities. There are, of course, potential issues that come with normalizing LGBTQ+ identities such as overusing problematic stereotypes, as Walters point out, but to reach those issues, aro-ace characters must first be portrayed as unapologetically aro-ace on TV.

The fact that *Riverdale* is now in its third season, and Jughead and Betty are still in a relationship (they recently sang about choosing to focus on their teen romance) makes me lose hope. *Riverdale* is catering to sexualnormative and amatonormative norms, and that portrayal is representative of how society treats non-lesbian or gay queer identities. The act of aro-ace erasure alone is troubling, but the conversation surrounding the justification of that action is what troubles me more. Identity erasure rooted in sexualnormative and amatonormative tendencies is harmful to the LGBTQ+ community, especially when it's evident in a widespread show like *Riverdale*.

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