

Skye Leal

Professor Dombourian

ENGL M01B

30 October 2024

Asexuality and Aromanticism in *House of Leaves*

Mark Z. Danielewski's 2000 debut novel, *House of Leaves*, is a marvel of multi-layered fiction. It is comprised of at least three simultaneous narratives, all intertwining and engaging with one another, yet ultimately still existing within their own contexts. To analyze and engage with these multiple narratives is to approach the text with radically different interpretations of what is occurring whenever a new bit of information is revealed to the audience. In many ways, this method of interactivity reflects the constant evolution of social and philosophical commentary regarding societal constructs like gender and sexuality, themes of which also exist plainly in the text of *House of Leaves*. Through the relationship of Will Navidson and Karen Green, *House of Leaves* explores the concepts of asexuality and aromanticism, analyzing the mentalities of conformity and depicting the ongoing struggle to define the existence of absence.

Fundamentally, there is an absence of attraction between Karen and Will, an absence that is reflected in the behavior of their house on Ash Tree Lane. The relative isolation of the house in terms of its locale seems to contradict Karen and Will's reasoning for purchasing it in the first place—to build a home for their children—as it pulls them away from a central community and into an insular space. This speaks to the idea that Will and Karen purchased the house as a means to conforming to a heterocentric image of family life, rather than from a genuine desire from either of them to actively participate in said image. The house denies them their attempt to silently conform, however, when the first instance of its eccentricities appears in the form of a

closet between the parents' and the children's rooms (Danielewski, 24). This appearance not only serves as an overt reference to the concept of "being in the closet," but also reinforces the definitive lack of attraction between Karen and Will, as the closet only appears once the family returns home after attending a wedding. Marriage represents the pinnacle of heterocentric conformity to them, and despite having children of their own, their lack of any legal binding reflects their own personal degrees of comfort in regards to meeting a conformist image. To Karen and Will, their family is about looking the part, not living it. Of course, the house already knows this, and so upon their return from a direct encounter with what the wider world expects of them as a seemingly heterosexual couple, the house presents them with a physical manifestation of the lack of attraction that defines both of them. In this sense, it's not that the house triggers the emotional conflict between Karen and Will, but rather that Karen and Will trigger the physical responses of the house themselves.

Although the house's behavior exists as a reflection of Will and Karen's inhabitance, its behavior is ultimately separate from its identity and existence, which makes the house an apt symbol for sexuality as a whole. As Julie Decker says succinctly in her book, *The Invisible Orientation: A Guide to Asexuality*: "orientation is not a behavior" (20). Decker notes the important sentiment that what someone does, and who they do it with, does not necessarily define or denote their identity. This is reflected in the reveal that some fragments of the house appear to be older than the Earth, or even the solar system itself (Danielewski, 378). This prehistoric aging of the house, combined with its nature as a reflection of those who enter it, indicate that the house's behavior is something that shifts to fit the ethos of its time, while its ultimate identity as an enigmatic force of nature is something permanent and unchanging. This duplicity is emblematic of the ways many non-heterosexual individuals feel pressured into

conformity due to their circumstances. Conformity as a denial of asexuality can be seen in particular with Will and Karen, as, much like the house, their behaviors and identities exist uniquely from one another. Although the two of them have sex often upon first moving into the house, a footnote in Zámpano's analysis reveals that they both have their own collections of sex-related self-help books (Danielewski, 62). This indicates a disconnect between their identity and behavior. Sex does not come naturally to them; rather, it is something they need to teach themselves to feel and perform. They learn from the books in the same way that the house learns from them. The primary difference is that, while Will and Karen learn in order to mask and hide themselves, the house learns in order to reveal their reality and ultimately force them to confront their truth.

In the wake of the house's behavior, Karen begins to serve as a barrier to Will's intrigue and desire to explore the house, primarily because, as a woman, she feels more pressure to conform to heterocentric expectations of her. Though both Will and Karen experience a lack of traditional attraction, they appear to each represent two unique experiences within that realm of absence. While Will's story appears to explore a narrative regarding a lack of sexual attraction, Karen's story appears to be one that explores a lack of romantic attraction. Karen's entire narrative arc confronts this continuous internal struggle between the desire to conform to heterocentricity, and acceptance of her own aromanticism. In her 2014 essay for *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, Ela Przybylo recalls a quote that was directed towards David Jay, founder of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network, during an interview on *The View*: "I could see for a woman. But you? You have to do something." This quote reflects an interesting mentality regarding the dynamics between gender, romance, and sex. It implies that, within broader society, men are associated with sex and physicality, and women are associated with

romance and idealism. This social association is an underlying contributor to Karen's internal conflict, because she appears to defy these expectations at every turn, engaging in chaste sexual encounters with other men and simultaneously refusing to partake in any behavior that may traditionally be seen as romantic with Will. The novel insinuates that this behavior is essentially a form of weaponized femininity, noting that Karen might "refrain from relying on other men to mollify her insecurities if Navidson curbed his own risk-lust and gave domesticity a real shot" (Danielewski, 82). To this end, Will is essentially a tool for Karen to continue to claim entry to a heteronormative existence, which is why his rejection of her fears regarding the house is so upsetting to her. If he pursues his exploration of the house, and by extension, his direct exploration and confrontation of his own sexuality, then it means that Karen loses her own tether to the safety of conformity. This mentality regarding women and their association between heterocentrism and safety is further explored by author Emily Kane in her essay, "Men's and Women's Beliefs about Gender Inequality: Family Ties, Dependence, and Agreement," where she comments: "married women [...] feel less freedom to diverge from [...] men's interpretations of gender inequality." Essentially, dependence on men for financial, social, or emotional protection leads to a mentality among women in which they are less likely to criticize their own lack of power and individuality within society, and instead conform to a more "traditional" expectation of womanhood, lest they lose access to the safety net provided by the men in their lives. In this sense, Karen's conformity becomes a sort of survival mechanism where she is ultimately striving to avoid confronting her own aromanticism, because to do otherwise would mean to restructure her entire worldview regarding womanhood. This is the underlying fear that drives Karen's private ultimatum towards Will; if he continues to distance himself from heteronormative conformity, then she will leave with the kids and find someone else to fill the

picture (Danielewski, 62). Karen's association of conformity with safety and survival also extends to her fear of the house, and the house's synonymy with her rejection of her own aromanticism. If Karen's conformist mentality is a survival mechanism, then the hallway is Karen's lack of attraction made physical, and her claustrophobia is once again a heightened physical response to the fear of societal rejection. This means that once Karen finally braves the darkness in order to save Will, she is finally directly confronting her driving fear of that rejection. Although the ending of Will and Karen staying together to raise their family seems to uphold that initial image of conformity, Karen's silent response to her final interview question reveals the truth: "...the house dissolved? How is that possible? It's still there, isn't it?" (Danielewski, 525). At the end of her journey, Karen is finally able to accept that forcibly denying her lack of romantic attraction will not change the reality of its non-existence.

Will's ultimate quest to document and investigate the house is a direct allegory for the struggle to define and defend asexuality and aromanticism within society. At its core, the space within the house serves as a representation for the "space" that denotes a lack of attraction. As Decker notes in her defense of asexuality, "the word "none" can still fill in a blank" (19). Will being held back from his explorations is synonymous with this struggle to prove the existence of asexuality. After all, how does one define a negative? Similar to Karen's struggles to accept her aromanticism due to how it appears to defy all traditional expectations regarding women and romantic desire, Will's masculinity serves as a barrier to his exploration of asexuality in and of itself. Ela Przyblo notes in her essay that asexuality is often "implausible and uninhabitable for men." As noted before, men are often traditionally associated with sex and physicality, so for Will to reject those concepts in favor of defining their absence is for will to reject traditional masculinity as a whole—another reason why Karen is initially so desperate to stop him. Will's

pursuit of his asexual identity also shares thematic parallels with Will Slocombe's observations regarding the philosophy of nihilism within *House of Leaves*. Slocombe states that nihilism is "the space that all other philosophies have written over, the very fact by which they exist." If the philosophy of nihilism strives to represent nothingness, and is by extent overwritten by the championship of existence, then it parallels the ongoing fight to define asexuality by its inherent definition of non-existent attraction. Slocombe also notes that "the intent of all Being [is] to eradicate the trace of non-Being," a nihilistic concept that is paralleled in Will's pursuit of knowledge from the house. It is also simultaneously undermined by the house itself. Although the spaces within the house change shape and fluctuate in and out of existence, there is no ability to deny that they do and did exist. Once again, the house retains its position as a symbol of sexuality, though now it can be specifically analyzed through the lens of asexuality. As Will finally succeeds in documenting his journey into the house, he too succeeds in his pursuit of defining his own identity. This acceptance is ultimately reflected in the closing shots of The Navidson Record, something that Will "knows is true and always will be true": an empty road leading into an undefinable swath of darkness (Danielewski, 528). Much like how the house continues to exist despite its shifting behaviors, Karen and Will's lack of attraction still exists despite the novel ending with them still maintaining a picture of conformity. Their happy ending lies not in their continued upholding of domestic family life, but in how they both no longer feel a need to deny and suppress their defiance of traditional heteronormativity, instead making space within it for their mutual acceptance of their aromanticism and asexuality.

Although there are a multitude of narratives within *House of Leaves*, many of them can all be underscored by a central theme of searching for identity and definition within society. Even though they were seeking to define an image of love that defies conventional expectations,

Karen and Will's journey in particular speaks to the sense of freedom that comes with self-acceptance and assuredness in one's own identity.

Works Cited

- Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. Pantheon Books, 2000.
- Decker, Julie Sondra. *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality*. Skyhorse Publishing, 2014.
- Kane, Emily W. "Men's and Women's Beliefs about Gender Inequality: Family Ties, Dependence, and Agreement." *Sociological Forum*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1998, pp. 611–37. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/684866>. Accessed 29 Oct. 2024.
- Przybylo, Ela. "Masculine Doubt and Sexual Wonder: Asexually-Identified Men Talk About Their (A)sexualities." *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, edited by Karli J. Cerankowski & Megan Milks, New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 225-248.
- Slocombe, Will. "'THIS IS NOT FOR YOU': NIHILISM AND THE HOUSE THAT JACQUES BUILT." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2005, pp. 88–109. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26286354>. Accessed 17 Oct. 2024.