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Table of Contents

Asexuality and Aromanticism in House of Leaves

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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 existplainly 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 iinto 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

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, dependance 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 synonymity 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 Sloclombe'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.

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The Cost of the American Dream

JULIETA CHAUBEL

Julián had just flown 16 hours from his home in Argentina to Los Angeles. His entire life was contained in the green suitcase by his side including a few clothes and a scrapbook of family photos. He had lost his father just the year before, but the unstable economy and widespread corruption he was leaving behind would remain for his mother and three sisters, along with their shared grief. Somehow, although Julián knew no one who had even moved across town, he had found the guts to go - to leave family, friends, his language, his culture, the only home he had ever known. All he knew was that an even longer journey would begin the next day, on the campus of one of the most prestigious private research universities in the world. He had no money, hoping the small stipend from the university would suffice. He also did not speak English.

Twenty-four years later, Julián sits in the study of his small home in the suburbs of Southern California. He is financially stable, a U.S. citizen, and both a husband and a father - my father. The room is small and Argentine memorabilia fills the shelves. The side table, holding a gourd and thermos of hot water, is covered with greenish-brown rings from the yerba mate tea that he has sipped from a metal straw every single day for the past two and a half decades. The steam from the thermos is illuminated by early morning light that penetrates the shutters.

Why mate? The use of this herb can be traced back

thousands of years. The plant from which it comes is native to South America. According to an article by Anna Gawron-Gzella and others, its use ranges from physiological stimulation, to weight control, to inflammation reduction. It is the preferred morning drink for all Argentines. But for Julián, the buzz of the mateine, similar to caffeine, is both a reminder of home and a relentless habit. It allowed him to complete his PhD he admits: "I would stay up all night drinking mate so I could stay awake and study." He has yet to go a day without it.

Today, and as he does every workday, Julián wakes at 6am. He is a creature of habit, cherishing rituals; he immediately gets dressed, heats water for mate, reads the online Argentine newspaper first, then the CNN updates, eats the yogurt he makes himself, mixed with granola, and finally sits at his desk to begin his job as a mathematician.

I sit beside him as he logs on to the employee network, sipping his mate. He has large bags under his eyes, but your gaze is drawn to his prominent aquiline nose, indicative of his Spanish heritage. His face is no longer framed by the dark curls of his youth but short, sporadic spikes of gray. Thin lips and dark, bushy, and highly arched eyebrows leave him with a sinister expression. Indeed, with his back hunched over his computer screen, he looks like a mad scientist.

After receiving his doctorate in Applied and Computational Mathematics from California Institute of Technology, Julián got a post-doc then a full-time job at Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) - NASA 's only federally funded research and development center. Despite the glamor ofChaubell 3 the title, the multiple awards from NASA, and the deep appreciation and admiration he receives from his colleagues for his extraordinary work, Julián resents the tedium of the job, counting down the days until his retirement. "Only nine more years until I'm on the beach of Pontevedra with una cerveza in my hand," he says grimly. He's been working on the same satellite communication program for nine years. For him, it feels like eternity.

He takes a deep breath, returning to the screen as his phone rings. It's the health insurance company returning his call. This year marks a switch from an HMO to a PPO meaning yet another new American system to navigate. The visits to the orthopedist, two MRIs, and the increase in physical therapy appointments, all a consequence of decades worth of rugby tackles, mean money is pouring out in all directions and there seems to be a lack of transparency, something he is determined to understand. Via phone, in his desperation to understand the bureaucracy of the US healthcare system, he doesn't exactly come across as a polite client. "WHAT YOU MEAN THE RIGHT ELBOW COST MORE THAN MY LEFT ELBOW?" he bellows. Despite his volume, his thick accent often makes him unintelligible to the outsider, and his grammar can be quite creative. He repeats his questions multiple times, only heightening the distress of the situation. Frustrated and dissatisfied by the vague responses of the representative, he hangs up. Life in the U.S. seems

unnecessarily complex. As he likes to say, "My father died, we buried him, paid his debts, end of story, but here, so much paperwork, so much drama..." Argentina has universal health care. It may not be the best, but it is included. You visit the doctor and it's free. End of story.

Julián arrived with the absolute minimum of English. But his roommate had a tv and he managed to learn English by watching the American sitcom Seinfeld all throughout graduate school. The phrases "Tippy toe, tippy toe!" and "NO SOUP FOR YOU!" still come out frequently and with ease, but the pronunciation of other words is still a struggle. He somehow still has a limited verbal vocabulary in his adopted language but for some reason, an extraordinary written command of it that he puts to use for his publications. In spite of the limitations of his English, it has become a habit over the years, even to dream in it, to use it while on the phone with his family back home, somehow switching to English out of nowhere and without even realizing it, mystifying his siblings into silence. It is as if he is more accustomed to this constant struggle than he is to speaking his native tongue. Some call this assimilation; he would likely call it a sad loss of home.

Back in his study, four hours have gone by since the insurance phone call and Julián gets up with a groan, stretches and heads to the kitchen. He cuts up an orange and an apple and takes out the large jar of natural peanut butter from the fridge. The apple with peanut butter is new to his routine choice of meals. "Emma Stone's favorite snack is apples and peanut butter," he recites. "It's super good! Try it!"

Coming to the US in '98, Julián knew two recipes, and two recipes only. "Chicken with onions" and "rice with olives, mayo, hard boiled eggs and tuna" comprised his dinner rotation. Upon arrival in Pasadena, he bought one cup, one plate, one set of silverware, a wooden spoon and a sharp knife from Ross Dress For Less. He had never lived on his own and missed his mother's skill in the kitchen: empanadas, sopa de mariscos, y alfajores. But as time passed, like many Americans who are seeking better health, he learned more about the benefits of plant based recipes and has now completely shifted his lifestyle to eating this way five out of the seven days of the week. On Sundays, however, he lets loose. In classic Argentine fashion, he prepares an elaborate barbecue, asado as he prefers to call it. His specialties include chorizo (spiced sausage), ribs, molleja (the thyroid gland of an animal), and tri-tip. The other five days of the week, meat-free dinners are prepared by his American wife, Nancy. As the sun begins to set, she knocks on the door of his study, kindly asking if he wouldn't mind helping out in the kitchen. He replies, not quite as kindly, "I can't. Somebody's gotta work around here," ignoring the fact that she, too, "works around here." He may resent his work, but he is disciplined and devoted to it, working countless hours and often deeply distracted by it, leaving the computer only when his stomach growls too loudly.

After dinner, Julián retires to the couch where he watches whatever sports an Argentine team may be playing that night. Tonight: rugby - his favorite. He began playing the sport at the age of seven with his friends in their hometown Club Universitario. "I dedicated my life to it," he says. Even today, at 58 years old, Julián will jump at the opportunity to

play with a team of strangers and then return home proudly… heavily bandaged and bruised, but proud. He's never happier than when he's on that field. It can be seen in his eyes now, as he gazes intently at the TV where the thuggish men, clad in blue and white stripes, dash across the screen, scoring. "TRY!!!" he yells, leaping to his feet. He takes a final celebratory glug of wine, and announces that he is going to bed. The clock reads 9:14 pm.

Back home in the Southern Hemisphere, the time is 1:14 am but for his family and friends, the night is still young. That far south the sun sets late and a midnight meal is nothing unusual throughout the summer months. His mother sits in her wheelchair solving a puzzle, his sisters and their husbands are laughing and drinking around the barbeque, and his nieces and nephews will soon leave the asado to go dancing at a club until the sun rises. They are oblivious to the cacophonous noise and litter of the city streets. It's all they know.

But Julián wakes to the silence of a quiet neighborhood, a silence broken only by the birdsong of dawn. Whether he is aware of it or not, he spends his weeks instinctively grasping for any bit of home - whether that be a gourd of mate, a glass of Malbec, a rugby ball, or the shoulders of other expat Argentines who stand around someone's backyard grill every

Thursday night. He knows he has paid a price in exchange for the education, job opportunities, stability, family, and freedom he has found in the United States. ut it will never fully be home. Like many immigrants, he both never regrets leaving and always regrets leaving. He is both proud of and ashamed of the country he left behind. His salary is generously shared with his mother and sisters, allowing him to feel that he made the right decision. But while his childhood friends regularly gather for raucous reunions at Club Universitario without him, he wonders about the cost of this life of stability.

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A “Homo Superior” Perspective of Superhero Comics

BEE KAO

A secret life sits in the back of a closet; a transforming body wraps fluidly around an identity that it doesn’t always match; there's an otherness to this existence, lived by the queer community and reflected in the stories of superheroes. While the superhero genre may be idealized as upholding hetero-hypermasculinity, the pages of the comics have always carried undeniably queer themes. Analyzing superhero comics through a queer lens reveals how the medium has thrived in exploring identities of gender and sexuality outside of the cis-hetero norm. From masks and closets to Pride-colored capes, queer subtext and history are intrinsic arts of the superhero story, paramount to the development of the genre as a whole.

Fear of homosexuality in comic books festered its way into American minds in the 1950s when Dr. Fredric Wertham’s Seduction of the Innocent accused comics of poisoning young minds. This came with the claim that Batman and Robin shared a homoerotic relationship, and that Wonder Woman promoted lesbianism. The concern over children’s potential comic-induced corruption led to the formation of the Comics Code Authority, an organization dedicated to keeping unsavory ideas out of mainstream comics (Kistler). Their rules prohibited “sex perversion,” “sexual abnormalities,” and “illicit sex relations,” which, at the time, outruled the LGBTQ+ community entirely. Independently published comics

independently published comics could forgo the "Comics Code Authority Approved" stamp, but these smaller gay comics often revolved around the everyday homosexual experience rather than spandex-clad fantasy characters (Tomecek). This meant "the big two" publishers of superhero comics, Marvel and DC, were particularly affected. Still, underneath the censorship, queer subtext was blooming between Comics Code Authority Approved! pages.

One of the most prevalent ideas in superhero comics is that of being an outsider to the mainstream public—the oppression of "otherly" super-powered individuals transparently echoes the struggles of minority groups in society. So, as homosexuality was ousted from comics, comics depicted the ousting of superheroes from their own societies. The outsider experience of queerness is best exemplified in the stories of the mutant race from Marvel's X-Men, a "homo superior-sapien" subspecies of the human race ostracized from society for their strange abilities. Key to this parallel is the "adolescent discovery of a minority identity" depicted in the X-Men comics (Kreeger). In a mirror to the queer youth experience, a young mutant would typically go through the arc of discovering "something special about her, something that made her different from everybody else, something that both separated her from her community and made her yearn for a different community full of people more like her" (Kreeger). Mutants struggled with familial acceptance and hiding their true selves; they were bullied and called slurs when hiding wasn't an option. LGBTQ+ readers would be able to connect to these quintessentially queer crises, but more importantly, they could see themselves in the ways that mutants overcame

their challenges, accepted themselves, and grew into their powers.

Where mutantkind represents a broader issue of oppression, X-Men's Rogue is a figure that more closely touches on homosexual guilt and repression. With her ability to absorb power and energy through skin contact, Rogue is cursed to never touch another being without severe consequence. She yearns for intimacy but cannot let herself be tempted by lust or love, living in fear of what might happen if she acts on her desires. In X-Men #24 by Fabian Nicieza, Rogue hesitates in growing closer to her romantic interest, Gambit, as they balance finding love without expressing physical affection. Though the two present as a heterosexual relationship, the sentiments shared between them are defined by Rogue's curse and mirror the suppressed love of a closeted gay couple. Not only does Rogue bar herself from loving, but she bars herself from being loved because of the temptation that it serves for her. She bitterly recalls her first kiss, "the first [and] last time [she] kissed someone out of passion", and how it put her first boyfriend in a coma (29). The possibility of hurting somebody she loves because of that same love shapes every following relationship for her. The fear of expressing queer love in homosexual relationships and the repression embedded into it are embodied by Rogue and the role she takes in her romances. Her young encounter with the illicitness of her love is another example of how mutant adolescence is similar to the queer youth experience—it results in her being ousted from her home by her father and going on the run in search of a community. She finds that community in the shape-

Nicieza 28

shifting arms of Mystique, a mutant who transforms and shifts her way in and out of Rogue's life as her surrogate mother, her enemy, and a complicatedly literal representation of gender fluidity.

For the shape-shifters of the super-community, gender is often a blurred line, with bodies that are constantly in a transitional state; it's not uncommon to see a character like Mystique transform from her blue female figure to a human male one. This thereby lends an easy visual representation of a "trans-gendered" character. The reader is able to view a male body and know rhat the character is actually female (or vice versa)—or see the character as being without gender entirely. While real-life transitioning by no means grants superpowers, "as a biological misfit, the superhero inhabits a body that deviates from real-life bodies and may therefore queer mainstream views of gender and sexuality rooted in references to the physical body" (Stein). As bodies shift between pages, the audience is able to view a figure beyond the binary.

Beyond this, many superheroes experience a different type of transition: Johnny Storm's body bursts spontaneously into a soaring flame, Bruce Banner "hulks out" into a green monster, and Bobby Drake freezes into an "Iceman". By posing these otherly bodies as heroic and relatable, comic books "[cultivate] an affective orientation toward otherness and difference that [make] so-called deviant forms of bodily expression…both desirable and ethical" (Ibid qtd. in Stein). It is understood by the audience that the charming and attractive Johnny Storm is still the same person, even if engulfed in flame with his edges softened and his body unviewable. The queerness of the superbody aligns with Eve Sedgwick's definition: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be

made) to signify monolithically" (qtd. in Fawaz 80). The transforming body of the superhero lives within these gaps and lapses—queer in the ways that they are not restricted by gender binaries, nor the typical human body. Transformation can also be viewed in the costume change from civilian to superhero, a back-and-forth transition that occurs regardless of transfigurative powers. "Is it any coincidence that so many superheroes are characterized by a split identity, one that operates according to the logic of a gendered binary?" questions Aaron Taylor in his analysis of superhero bodies. When Batman dons his cowl, he is no longer Bruce Wayne, the billionaire playboy; he is human, but still ultimately other as the Dark Knight. Similarly, when Clark Kent puts on his glasses, he is no less an alien wonder. This severance and conflation of identities existing within the same person balances the truer self and the self that is restricted by the rigidity of society. This is epitomized through Superman, as "some gay men have identified with the way he must rigidly divide his life between a boringly normative day job, and a fabulous second self who can only find true expression by night, in secret" (Kustritz). The nature of the secret identity means that a superhero is inherently different from the civilians around them in a way that nobody but themselves know. This suppression or "closeting" of the truer second self is chief to the closeted queer narrative, and the superhero's struggle in "coming out" to family and friends in fear of a negative reaction serves to uphold this. While Clark Kent's parents know that he is no normal man, he still must hide his alienness from his coworkers and love interest. Peter Parker's Aunt May often expresses her own distaste for Spider-Man, reinforcing his apprehension around coming out to the person he trusts the

most. For superheroes and the queer community alike, the hidden identity is a weighty secret that they must keep close to their chest—a costume in the back of their closet.
The 80s and 90s saw the queer subtext of superhero comics shift into more intentional allegories. Arnie Roth was introduced as Captain America's "childhood friend who never married because relationships never seemed 'right'" and Superman met Maggie Sawyer, a Metropolis cop living with another woman—in addition to living with her own repressed feelings (Kistler). These breakthroughs were part of a pushback to the Comics Code Authority and the hold it had over the comic book industry. In 1989, the Comics Code Authority lifted censorship around LGBTQ+ content—just 3 years later, Northstar from Marvel's Alpha Flight came out as the first gay superhero. This was notably in response to the ongoing AIDs crisis in an issue attempting to spread awareness about the disease. Superhero comics, being a political medium of moral righteousness and wrongdoing, had many stories to tell about the epidemic of the era.

Byrne

Due to the association that HIV/AIDs had with gay men at the time, more queer characters and allegories made their way into these stories. One of the most well-remembered of these plot lines lasted throughout the 90s in the X-Men's tales of the Legacy Virus, a fatal illness that spread amongst

mutants. In a retrospective analysis, Angela Davis explains, "The Legacy Virus gave fans a glimpse into the chaos the queer community experienced during the epidemic through the eyes of their favorite heroes, painting a horrific picture of just how dark this time was for real people." It was ultimately an imperfect metaphor, as were many of the early representations of the LGBTQ+ community.

Although many of these tales have aged poorly nowadays, at the time, it opened the doors for more LGBTQ+ characters to make their way onto the action-punching pages.

The early 2000s was when queer representation first thrived in superhero comics. Positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters continued to emerge, including the introduction of new and original queer heroes as well as the retroactive queering of previous ones. Writers both recognized and utilized the queer subtext that preceded them: in the story of "coming out" as a superhero, Billy Kaplan of The Young Avengers accidentally comes out to his parents as gay (Heinberg); through the gender fluidity of shapeshifting, Xavin of The Runaways shifts between male, female, and outright alien—naturally becoming Marvel's first genderqueer hero (Vaughan). This decade transitioned comics from queer subtleties to explicit queer pride and has led to the celebration of queer superheroes, their stories, and their creatives in the modern day. Since 2021, both Marvel and DC have released annual Pride month comics revolving around LGBTQ+ characters. New characters with queer identities have found a natural belonging alongside mutants and metahumans as well spandex-clad superheroes with secret selves. This has allowed queer readers to

Heinberg 7

unquestionably mark their existence down across rainbow-colored panels. The rich history of queer subtext evolved into representation that the audience no longer has to search for, and the coming out of the gay superhero is one that won't be going back in the closet anytime soon.

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Adam and Eve as Tragic Heroes

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In terms of tragedies, it's hard to get more archetypical than man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Its theme of the first men dooming themselves to destruction is not out of place among classical tales of doom- Pandora's box, Prometheus's theft of fire, and Oedipus or Ulysses's needlessly destructive attempts at heroism. However, Paradise Lost's particular depiction of Eve's choice to doom her descendants shares a significantly different framing to even it's contemporaries' tragedies. John Milton's depiction of Adam fits the tragic hero archetype much more strongly than his depiction of Eve, and the framing and presumption of Eve as one reflects on the common views of women in his time.

When comparing Adam and Eve to the tragic hero archetype, comparing the literal content of their story should come second to comparison of the overall mechanics of their arc. A tragedy, to both the Greeks and later English, wasn't simply a checklist of tropes, but used to evoke a specific kind of response in the audience. The failure of a tragic hero is meant to "[move] us to pity, because… his misfortune is greater than he deserves, but [move] us also to fear, because we recognize similar possibilities of error in our own lesser and fallible selves" (Abrams 322). He is meant, first and foremost, to be empathized with and related to, his dramatic fall being an exaggerated reflection of our own

failures. This effect is often greater when the hero is "better than we are", or is seen as exceptional to the audience. If even the greatest men can be blinded by weakness, the audience is even less "safe". Through this lens, Milton's Adam is set up far more tragically. When the serpent plots the couple's demise, he states his reluctance to target Adam due to his "higher intellect… strength.. and courage" (Milton 8.483-484). His supposed infallibility suits this dimension of tragic heroism; if even the explicit admission of Satan himself that he won't easily turn to sin doesn't keep him from dooming himself, there can't be much keeping the audience. Eve is explicitly targeted due to her physical weakness and vulnerability; in the snake's eyes, she is less likely to resist physically or mentally. While the emphasis of a tragic hero's arc is on their faulty decisions leading to disproportionate consequences, Eve, who is at this point only characterized with the purity and naivety of the garden, is not set up for her judgements to be examined and empathized with.

Another primary characteristic of a tragic hero is their fall from grace being caused by a "mistaken choice of an action to which he is led by his hamartia- .. his tragic flaw" (Abrams 322). If Eve were a tragic hero, eating the apple would be caused by a lapse in judgment brought on by her own hamartia, but Milton's detailing of her thought process does not stick to a specific emotional blind spot affecting her decisions. Her reasonings are disconnected and inconsistent as she muses of God's tyranny in denying them knowledge and speculates on his reasoning. According to her perception, the serpent has eaten the fruit and prospered, so there is no reason to believe it could be harmful. She does not "know what to fear/ under this ignorance of good

and evil,/ Of God or death, of law or penalty" (Milton 8.773-775). Eve's explicitly stated lack of judgment contradicts the purpose of a tragic hero- to show the follies of human judgment that she pointedly predates. Eve's reasoning here is, from her perspective, completely accurate. She has no concept of sin, no proof the serpent is a liar, and no reason to distrust his words given, lying as a concept has not been introduced to her. The only flaw that could be assigned to her is naivety, which is by the narration, attributed to the state of their existence rather than her nature, or a greed for knowledge or power, which she only barely displays after her seduction by the serpent. An audience cannot connect their own lusts for power with Eve's, or see it as an exaggeration or dark reflection of their own desires, contradicting the main objective of a tragic narrative. Adam, however, upon hearing of Eve's deed, the serpent and all her newfound knowledge, instantly grasps the scope and severity of their situation. Understanding the wrath they've incited upon them and their new reality of death, his lapse in judgment is due to his own care for Eve. He believes he cannot "live without [Eve]... forgo/ [her] sweet converse and love", and therefore, cannot let her eventually die without him (Milton 8.908-909). He, supposedly before any knowledge of sin, chastises her, showing that he completely understands what she has brought upon them. He ultimately decides, knowingly and consciously, to doom herself along with her, clearly laying out his damnation as a mistaken choice caused by his tragic flaw of desire for Eve.

As a counterpoint, neither Adam nor Eve fit every main criteria of a tragic hero. Tragedies aim, as a whole, to evoke the "tragic pity and fear" of the consequences of the

character's actions, which, surprisingly, doesn't fit this adaptation. After Adam and Eve succumb to sin and give in to their carnal desires, the presence of God appears through their home, enlightening them of the earthly struggles that they will be subjected to punishment for their sin. As this passage details the pains of childbirth, labor, and eventually the opening of the gates of hell, the imagery of the "Son" (referring to Jesus) is repeatedly evoked, portraying their downfall as something ultimately necessary to pave the way for Jesus's birth and resurrection. The archangel Micheal eventually informs them of "the Woman's Seed… now amplier known thy savior and thy lord", referring to the birth of Christ, and details the eventual Last Judgment (Milton 12.543-544). Though, in the actual content of the story, humanity is doomed, any contemporary Christian would be familiar with the rest of the Bible, and therefore not view this as a true tragic ending. In this very scene, Micheal goes on to tell the couple that, now that they have such extensive knowledge, they have the capability to achieve happiness through building their godly character, encouraging them to "add faith, patience, temperance… then will thou not be loath to leave this paradise/ … posses[ing]/ a paradise within… happier far" (583-587). Not only does this demonstrate that the couple's new state isn't only that of punishment, it essentially lays the ideological framework for all of humanity- the ideology by which the Christian audience would strive to live up to. This refutes the idea that either character is meant to be viewed as the protagonist of a tragedy. Christian audiences would not view every aspect of Biblical canon as simply exaggerated consequences of Eve's choices.

However, the distinction of Adam as more closely embodying

the tragic hero rather than Eve is important for more than semantics. The tragic hero is an archetype which, as previously stated, implies a great deal of agency, more so than the average person: they doom themselves out of misjudgment, and that misjudgment is meant to reflect back on the audience. However, Eve's lack of agency turns her assumed inclusion into this archetype into an assumption of purposeful, calculated maliciousness- an interpretation of Eve not only used commonly to portray women misogynistically, but during Milton's time period, to blame actual women as a group for the downfall of humanity. It reflects strongly on Milton that a character literally established as having no concept of sin is be assigned "seduction" or manipulation while still being treated with all the condescension of her supposed lack of any knowledge; you couldn't ask for a clearer example of women of the time being seen as either incapable of reason or active manipulators depending on which is more convenient to a male-centric narrative. Meanwhile, Adam is rewarded all the glory of being the first, strongest, and most capable man, until he commits a sin, and he is suddenly devoid of all agency and has no culpability for his own actions. It's additionally notable how Adam's fatal flaw is his trust in Eve and willingness to obey his heart over his intellect- while this is a trait used not only to characterize Eve as weak, but a common trait used to paint women either negatively or condescendingly. For the sex so often viewed as less sentimental, Milton certainly excuses dooming mankind because of Adam's noble sentimentality towards Eve. With many feminist texts commenting on Eve's fall and connecting their own struggles to supposed spite against this original

sin, the specific vision of this story these authors would be familiar with is a vital resource.

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