

“It really got to me [...] The movies where the main characters freaked out about being virgins at the age of sixteen”

Narrative Subversion as a Queer Strategy in *Loveless*

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Table of Content

1. Introduction	6
2. Methodology	9
2.1. Terminology.....	9
2.1.1. Asexuality.....	10
2.1.2. Aromantic.....	13
2.1.3. Allosexual, Alloromantic, Allonormative.....	13
2.1.4. Queer.....	14
2.2. Theoretical Framework.....	14
2.2.1. Genre Theory.....	14
2.2.2. Queer Theory.....	16
2.2.3. Intersectionality.....	18
3. Creating Allonormative Awareness	19
3.1. Introduction.....	19
3.2. Allosexual Normativity.....	19
3.3. Alloromantic Awareness.....	22
3.4. Raising Awareness of Genre Allonormativity.....	23
3.5. Conclusion.....	25
4. Subversion as a Queer Strategy	26
4.1. Introduction.....	26
4.2. Canceling the Sexual Script.....	26
4.2.1. Introduction.....	26
4.2.2. Sexual Scripts.....	27
4.2.3. Signaling the Urgency Script.....	28
4.2.4. Subversion of the Sexual Script.....	29
4.2.5. Conclusion.....	31
4.3. Expanding the Coming-of-Age Novel.....	32
4.3.1. Introduction.....	32
4.3.2. Loveless as a Coming-of-Age Novel.....	33
4.3.3. Adapting the Coming-of-Age Novel.....	36
4.3.4. Conclusion.....	38

4.4.	Recontextualizing the Romance Formula.....	39
4.4.1.	Introduction.....	39
4.4.2.	The Limits of the Alloromantic Romance	40
4.4.3.	Aromanticizing the Romance Formula.....	43
4.4.4.	Conclusion	48
4.5.	Narrative Play in <i>Loveless</i>	49
5.	The Nuance within Subversion	51
5.1.	Introduction.....	51
5.2.	Georgia’s Relative Privilege	52
5.3.	Utilizing Asexual Stereotypes.....	53
5.4.	Conclusion	55
6.	Conclusion	55
7.	References.....	60

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1. Introduction

Loveless, written by queer young adult fiction writer and best-seller Alice Oseman, follows young Georgia as she navigates shifting friendship dynamics, her first year at Durham university, and her blossoming identity as an asexual and aromantic individual. Entering university with her two long-time best friends Jason and Pip, she has one goal: to find love. This dream comes crashing down, however, when Georgia repeatedly realizes that she does not feel romantically or sexually attracted to anyone. Throughout the novel, Georgia gradually begins to realize that she is asexual and aromantic, and she has to grapple with this identity and the consequences that it entails for her future. Throughout this process she meets Rooney, her bright and talkative roommate, who seems to be grappling with her own struggles. Together with Jason and Pip, and joined by Georgia's college parent Sunil, they revive Durham University's Shakespeare Society. But will they be able to put on their end-of-the-year play when their individual turmoil is causing rifts in the group?

Loveless is part of a limited corpus of books centering an asexual and aromantic protagonist and, arguably, the most popular one, going on to win The YA Book Prize in 2021. As asexuality, just like aromanticism, remains “largely underrepresented, misrepresented, and misunderstood, in part due to its fledgling status as an acknowledged queer identity” (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 2*), it is extra important to examine the few main-stream depictions of these identities. Discriminative notions are rampant in asexual and aromantic communities. Asexual people are “perceived as missing something intrinsic” and subsequently regularly pathologized (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 5*). They are assumed to be lacking humanity and likened to aliens and robots (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 6*). Aromantic people, similarly, are perceived as “less human” and “set to live an unhappy life as a

person in nontraditional relationships (including being single)” (Fowler et al. 136). With these rampant stereotypes, positive representation becomes even more necessary.

This positive representation becomes even more crucial when taking into consideration that media informs adolescent youth on sex and sexuality (Kelly 480) and has “influence on attitudes toward sexuality” (Kelly 481). Novels like *Loveless*, being limited in number, can thus shape many readers’ perception of asexuality and aromanticism. Jenkins and Cart add that representation is especially important in YA novels such as *Loveless*, as “young people have a particularly urgent need to see their own faces reflected in the pages of a book and find the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is” (qtd. in Henderson, *Playing with Genre* 4). Despite this, fiction centering asexual and aromantic narratives remain underresearched. Przybylo & Cooper, for example, note that asexuality is “almost entirely absent in queer, feminist, and critical sexuality studies” (qtd. in Kennon 2). In this thesis, I hope to contribute in a small way to this gap in research.

Specifically, I want to argue that *Loveless* subverts –queers– allonormative genres and convention as a strategy to include and normalize aromantic and asexual voices. I will focus on the novel’s subversion of three allonormative formulas in particular: the sexual script, the coming-of-age novel, and the romance. To be able to clearly argue that *Loveless* subverts these genres as a way to demarginalize asexual and aromantic narratives, I have split this paper up in three main sections. In the first section, ‘Methodology’, I will clarify some of the terms frequently used in this paper, such as the ones found in my thesis statement: allonormativity, aromanticism and asexuality. As asexuality and aromanticism are still relatively under- and misrepresented in both media and queer scholarship, it is important to clearly establish what terms I use, and in what way I understand them. Aside from this clarifying list of terminology, the methodology section will

also include a brief overview of the theoretical frameworks I use and reference in this paper:

Genre theory, queer theory and intersectionality.

In the next section, section 3, I will argue that the queer genre subversions my thesis is centered around, can only be as effective as they are through *Loveless*'s repeated metafictional commentary on allonormativity (in fiction). I have subdivided this section into three points. The first subsection titled 'Allosexual Normativity' touches on *Loveless*'s explicit depiction of societal allosexual norms and the negative consequences they have on asexual and allosexual characters alike. The second subsection, 'Alloromantic awareness', similarly explores the portrayal of alloromantic norms and their harmful consequences. In the last subsection, 'Raising Awareness of Genre Allonormativity', I argue that the novel does not simply portray allonormativity, but also how it is shaped by and reflected in literature. This not only makes the readers aware of allonormative standards, it also creates a metafictional awareness of the generic conventions being used, making the reader more likely to notice the subversive use of formulas in the novel.

I explain my main argument that *Loveless* subverts allonormative narratives to include and normalize asexual and aromantic identities in section 4. I start this section off with the sexual script. After introducing the concept of sexual scripts, I examine how *Loveless* positions itself as an urgency script in section 4.2.3.: Signaling the Urgency Script. In section 4.2.4, I then clarify how the novel subverts and rejects the urgency script and how this points out the harmful nature of 'scripts' when something as personal as sexuality intimacy is portrayed. In section 4.3, I focus on the coming-of-age novel. I argue that *Loveless* consistently adheres to the conventions of the coming-of-age novel but refuses to comply with its allonormative conception of maturing as a process requiring a sexual awakening, thus desexualizing the coming-of-age genre and normalizing asexuality as just another way of experiencing the transition into adulthood. The last

genre subversion I explore is that of the romance. In section 4.4.2., I first look at how *Loveless* emphasizes that aromantic people are not able to access the romance genre by showing how Georgia is desperate to have her own love story but is unable to have one because of her aromanticism. Trying to adhere to the alloromantic romance formula as an aromantic person ruins her mental health and relationships. In section 4.4.3., I then argue that *Loveless* aromanticizes the romance genre by applying the romance formula to Georgia's platonic relationships, creating a platonic version of the romance. This aromanticized romance is accessible to aromantic people like Georgia, and validates platonic love as being worthy of its own story.

In the last section of this paper, I then nuance the subversiveness of *Loveless* as a novel, highlighting the conventions that the novel does follow. In the subsection titled 'Georgia's Relative Privilege', I examine Georgia's status as a white, able-bodied, cisgender, middle-class person and how this relatively privileged position gives her a 'pass' to be asexual and aromantic, aligning with findings that highlight how these relatively privileged people are prioritized in queer media. In the last subsection, 'Utilizing Asexual Stereotypes', I then point out the queer stereotypes that the novel adheres to: that of the female asexual and the aromantic asexual. I argue that these factors make Georgia, as a protagonist, more marketable to broader audiences.

2. Methodology

2.1. Terminology

As asexuality has its own glossary and is still a "deeply misunderstood and little-known sexual orientation" (Colborne 1), it is crucial to clarify the terms used in this paper as well as to briefly introduce the various debates and misconceptions surrounding them. These conversations as well as the emergence of asexuality itself, can, at times, be quite politically charged. In the following section, I will clarify my stance on various matters concerning asexuality.

2.1.1. Asexuality

Asexuality can most broadly be described as the complete or partial lack of sexual attraction in a person. Similar to C.J. Deluzio Chasin, I adopt the view that asexuality is “a meta-category, just like sexual” (721) rather than a sexual orientation. Asexuality is marked by the (partial) absence of sexual attraction towards other people, whereas a 'sexual orientation' implies the presence of sexual attraction in any direction (towards male, female, intersex, genderqueer or any possible combination). Aside from this, asexuality as a meta-category also stresses the “heterogeneity in terms of self-identification with asexuality, romantic orientation, and gender” (Chasin 721) that exists within the experiences of asexual-identifying individuals: asexual people vary in their degree of attraction, types of attraction, (sexual) background, (sexual) needs, etc.

It is important to note that the division asexual-sexual is not binary. There is an entire spectrum of possible orientations to be found between asexuality and sexuality. People leaning towards the asexual side of the spectrum often refer to themselves as ‘acespec’, derived from the frequent abbreviation of the adjective asexual as ‘ace’. On this spectrum we might find other possible orientations such as demisexuality – sexual attraction that is experienced only with a limited amount of people that the demisexual person feels emotionally close to – and graysexuality or gray-asexuality – sporadic, limited, situational or ambiguous sexual attraction –. We can also find a narrower use of the label ‘asexual’ within the asexual spectrum. Asexuality on this level typically refers more specifically to the complete absence of sexual attraction to others and can be situated on the extreme end of the asexual side of the spectrum. Individuals can at any time fluctuate on this spectrum (sometimes referred to as ‘aceflux’) or their position on the spectrum might change over time or between situations.

Conflating asexuality with frigidity is reductive, as “sexuality itself is likely to change throughout one’s lifespan, as the conditions and contexts of our lives undergo change” (Przybylo 184). Holding asexuality to such inflexible norms thus “discounts the ways in which our sexualities are made sense of in socially situated contexts” (Przybylo 184). *Loveless*, my case study for this thesis, locates its protagonist on the far end of the asexual spectrum. Georgia experiences a complete lack of sexual attraction, which poses her as asexual in the narrow sense: she “knew what sorts of feelings kissing was supposed to bring up [...] [She] didn’t feel any of that. [She] just felt a deep, empty dread in the pit of my stomach” (Oseman 231). The novel clarifies that “it wasn’t just a dislike of kissing. It wasn’t a fear or nervousness or ‘not meeting the right person yet’”: Georgia “did not feel the feelings of attraction [...] of desire, that other people felt” (Oseman 276, 277), eliminating other asexual identities like graysexual or demisexual. It is clear that Georgia has never been sexually attracted to anyone in any degree.

Now that I have established what I do consider ‘asexuality’ to be—a spectrum encompassing various smaller degrees of sexual attraction—it is necessary to address some common misconceptions regarding what asexuality is not. First, asexuality is not a medical or psychological condition. There is still a lot of confusion about the difference between asexuality and diagnostically defined sexual disorders, for example, in the DSM-V such as ‘female sexual interest/ arousal disorder’ (American Psychiatric Association 434) or ‘male hypoactive sexual disorder’ (American Psychiatric Association 441). Typically, the distinction between these sexual disorders and asexuality is made “on the basis that asexual people are not ‘distressed’ by their low interest in sex” (Przybylo 188). Of course, this distinction is not foolproof, as people can be distressed by their low interest in sex because of societal norms, for example. As Ela Przybylo comments, asexual people “are vulnerable to pathologization and medical treatment because they

deviate from ideals of sexual normalcy in terms of levels of sexual desire” (189), adding that “[women] are especially vulnerable to being diagnosed as exhibiting low levels of sexual desire” (186). This warrants caution for hasty diagnoses regarding sexual disorders. A low interest in asexuality does not imply any mental illnesses or trauma either, as “there is a lack of evidence to prove that asexuality derives from a disorder or traumatic experience” (Colborne 4).

Secondly, asexuality does not equate to a complete absence of sexual desire. Rather, there is no sexual attraction to other people (see my definition above of asexuality as “the (partial) absence of sexual attraction towards other people”). Some asexual people may still desire other forms of sexual behavior, such as masturbation (cf. Brotto et al., Prause & Graham,...). This misconception is addressed in *Loveless*, reflecting the novel’s educational intent: Georgia does masturbate (Oseman 214-217). Georgia’s auto-erotic behavior aligns with the research on real-life asexuals and dispels readers’ possible belief that asexual people do not participate in any sexual stimulation. Identifying as asexual does not necessarily entail a complete absence of sexual behavior either. Graham & Prause, for example, state that “asexuals appear to have similar levels of sexual behaviors to non-asexuals” (354): they “differed most in their sexual desire and sexual arousability levels, and not the amount of their sexual experience” (353). Asexual people may still engage in sexual acts with others for a variety of reasons (to satisfy their partner’s sexual needs, procreate, because they enjoy the romantic intimacy it creates,...). Thirdly, asexuality is not to be confused with presexuality –preadolescent nonsexuality–, as this would imply that one inevitably ‘grows out’ of their asexuality. Lastly, asexuality is not a conscious withholding of one’s sexuality, such as abstinence or celibacy. Abstinence and celibacy both imply that there is something to be abstained from. Sexual desire is still present in those cases but suppressed either

due to a personal choice or other circumstances outside of the individual's control. Asexuality, on the other hand, is not a choice, nor can it be changed by one's will.

2.1.2. Aromantic

Similarly to asexuality, identifying as aromantic, often shortened as 'aro' implies a partial or complete lack of romantic attraction. Romantic attraction too is a spectrum with similar categories such as 'demiromantic' –a person who only experiences romantic attraction with a limited amount of people that they are emotionally close to– and 'grayromantic/ gray-aromantic' –limited, situational or ambiguous romantic attraction–. It is important to establish the difference between romantic and sexual attraction, as the two tend to be conflated (cf. asking if you want to kiss someone as a common way of gauging romantic interest). One's sexual and romantic attraction do not necessarily correlate, meaning that being asexual “would not necessarily mean that these individuals do not have a romantic/ affectionate attraction for others” (Bogaert 241). People can be both asexual and aromantic, but also heteroromantic and asexual, homoromantic heterosexual, aromantic homosexual, graysexual demi- and panromantic,... Any combination between the (a)sexual and (a)romantic spectra is possible.

2.1.3. Allosexual, Alloromantic, Allonormative

Allosexuality is typically used to refer to those who do experience sexual attraction regularly, and do not identify as being on the asexual spectrum. Similarly, those who are alloromantic are not on the aromantic spectrum and experience romantic attraction regularly. Allonormativity then, entails “a worldview that assumes all people experience sexual and romantic attraction” (Lackman & Mollet 26), where allosexuality and alloromanticism are the norm. If something is allonormative, it assumes allosexuality, alloromanticism and/or both, depending on the context.

2.1.4. *Queer*

When talking about the communities of people outside of the cisgender heterosexual, heteroromantic norm often referred to as 'LGBTQ or 'LGBTQIA+', I will be using the term 'queer', since these acronyms inevitably foreground certain identities while sidelining other already marginalized identities.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This thesis will be split up in several sections focusing on the different parts of my argument. These sections will reference different frameworks and theories that require some introduction. Genre theory and queer theory inform the central argument of my thesis that *Loveless* uses genres with allonormative conventions and subverts them to destabilize their inherent allonormativity and normalize and include asexual narratives. The argument that *Loveless* depends on other social traditions to prevent becoming too subversive and alienating its audience relies on the framework of intersectionality.

2.2.1. *Genre Theory*

Many debates within modern genre theory find their roots in the Romantic movement of late eighteenth century Europe, when “the Aristotelian doctrine of the division of genres [...] was first called seriously into question, and the concept of genre itself came under scrutiny for the first time” (Duff 3). Since then, there have been many conflicting theories on the nature, delineation and features of a 'genre'. The distinction between genres, subgenres and microgenres, for example, is muddy: these terms assume “a measure of agreement about relative size or stability of the type of entity called 'genre' (or 'macrogenre') that in reality does not exist” (Duff 17). David Duff emphasizes these uncertainties: “It is probable [...] that the concept of genre will continue to

be put in question by more openended models of textuality, both those that stress the instability of all linguistic systems and those that emphasise the potentially unlimited scope of intertextuality” (16-17). Mapping out these different and often conflicting theories exceeds the scope of this research. For further information on the origin of genre theory and its different debates, I refer you to other introductory texts and anthologies –see, for example, Duff and Dowd et al.–. In this methodology, I shall purely focus on the concepts relevant to my thesis, specifying how I understand and use the terminology to avoid one of the “enduring problems of genre theory, namely confusion of terminology” (Duff 17).

In this thesis, I adopt the basis conception of genre as a “recurring type or category of text, as defined by structural, thematic and/ or functional criteria” (Duff xiii). It is important to note that genres are “socially constructed cognitive and rhetorical concepts” (Bawarshi 352) that are “in a constant process of negotiation and change” (Buckingham 137). Societies pick and “codif[y] the acts that correspond most closely to [their] ideology” (Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* 19), resulting in genres that “bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong” (Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* 19). Essentially, genres are shaped by societies and their values and can thus be used to extrapolate a society’s dominant ideologies. Different genres entail different “‘contracts’ to be negotiated between the text and the reader”, setting up “expectations on each side” (Livingstone 252). Genres thus function as “horizons of expectation” for readers (Todorov, *Origin of Genres* 163). These horizons can be crossed and expanded in several ways, through the use of conventions –“stylistic or formal device[s], or element[s] of subject matter, which [are] characteristic of a particular genre” (Duff x)–.

2.2.2. *Queer Theory*

Queer theory is a broad field that assumes a position “if not within the marginalized then at least outside of the margins of ‘normality’” (Britzman paraphrased in Dilley Britzman), creating “new ways of looking, new paradigms of analyzing, and new methods of presenting queer data” (Dilley 459). Queer theory has an extensive history and encompasses many different smaller frameworks that are impossible to include in this thesis. For more extensive introductions to queer theory, see Dilley, Jagose, Watson, Morland & Willox, and many others who have attempted to outline the theoretical field.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will limit this part of the methodology to one notion within queer theory that overlaps with genre theory: the idea that genre subversions can be used as a queer strategy to destabilize the prejudices present in genres. Scholars have long noted how writers adapt and subvert genre to include and normalize marginalized voices. Marjorie Stone, for example, writes in 1987 that “women write between existing genres or adapt male defined genres such as the bildungsroman to their own needs and rhetorical purpose” (101). Similarly, Naidu remarks that, while Chester Himes’s novel *Plan B* operates “within the main parameters of the [crime fiction] genre”, it “troubles and inverts some of the genre’s conventions, such as casting a white male as the lead detective, and female or other races and ethnicities as peripheral, often villainous characters”, thus “challenging persistently racist images in crime fiction” (Naidu 113). This deconstruction of privileged narratives is often referred to as ‘queering’ within queer theory.

Within queer theory, the notion of ‘queering’ has been intrinsically tied to subversion – more specifically, the subversion of hegemonic narratives and ideas–, with scholars using the term in their titles to express the “critical goal [...] to subvert cultural history by exposing a reality hitherto suppressed, namely the homosexuality of many major writers, artists, and composers of

the past” (Johnson 21). This queering to voice suppressed realities “appears especially in how [...] novelists take familiar genres and subvert their conventions” (Johnson 22) and, “as a matter of praxis, involves destabilizing the audience’s typical expectations” (Pugh 119) to do so. As the practice of queering concerns the subversion of hegemonic narratives in favor of expressing queer, marginalized experiences, it is important to recognize the power dynamics at play. Tison Pugh remarks about the queer subversions in Chaucer’s tale of the Wife of Bath that by “removing the male’s power as sexual agent and revising the paradigms of heteronormativity, the men—both husbands and fellow pilgrims—are queered into the very positions of powerlessness to which they would relegate the sexual others” (Pugh 117). There is an inherent power imbalance in society favoring white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual and allosexual people over queer others that is reflected in our genres—see Todorov’s observation that genres “bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong” (Genres in Discourse 19)—.

Queering genres, then, is used for the “specific purpose of subverting subject positions [...] previously marginalized agents can radically reconfigure the parameters of subject and object both inside and outside the narrative, for the textual world created within the genre and for the audience of the genre” (Pugh 119). In this way, subverting genre conventions—queering them—is a strategy to normalize and de-marginalize queerness; to claim space for and center queer realities. There are several alternative names for this strategy. Alex Henderson, for example, coins the term ‘queer narrative play’ to refer to a more specific type of queering genre. She defines queer narrative play as a “process of deliberately and visibly troubling, tweaking, and upturning readers’ expectations” (Henderson, *Playing with Genre* 1), stating that it can “occur in the deliberate and visible twisting of individual tropes within an intact generic structure, within the author’s deliberate use of speculative setting, and within the intermingling of narrative arcs traditionally

considered to not belong” (Henderson, *Playing with genre* 15). Importantly, she notes that an “additional layer of metatextual critique and textual queerness [is] required” (Henderson, *Playing with Genre* 7) in queer narrative play. According to her, casting queer protagonist is not enough without an acknowledgement of the power relations that are being subverted. Rather, there has to be a metatextual “conversation of recognition between text and reader which may be implicit or explicit in the work” (Henderson, *Playing with Genre* 7) to make the queer narrative play effective.

2.2.3. *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality is a transdisciplinary “theoretical lens to understand social inequality and the power dynamics surrounding gender, race, class, sexuality, citizenship, ablism, agism, and other identities used around the world to marginalize groups” (Romero 1). As a concept, it examines the complex ways in which different factors with different degrees of power and marginalization intersect. One can be privileged in some aspects of life, being born into the dominant race or gender, for example, while being marginalized in other ways, through sexuality and citizenship, for example. This makes any conversation surrounding societal power dynamics a complex, layered one with many intersecting webs of power and powerlessness. Because of these intersections, hierarchies have emerged in these marginalized communities, where those that are otherwise most privileged are preferred over people that are further marginalized in other aspects of life, establishing ‘normative’ ways to be marginalized.

The concept of ‘homonormativity’ is one example of this phenomenon that has been widely discussed. Homonormativity, according to Sarah Rüß, refers to “the adaptation of queer people to heterosexual ideals with the goal of normalizing homosexual realities of life” (92). Discussing lesbian representation in television shows, she remarks that conform to the normative

“lifestyle that focuses on marriage, monogamy, and raising children” (Rüß 89). This normativity in representation is not limited to behavior, however, normativity can also be found in character’s personal identities. Queer representation is still heavily skewed towards white, middle-class, able-bodied men. As Robert D Byrd, Jr. remarks: “white gay men are often given a pass, in the media, from white male privilege”, so much so that “[w]hite gay men then stand in as representation for all queer people despite race and/or gender identity, which works to further privilege white men and subordinate people of color” (305).

3. Creating Allonormative Awareness

3.1. Introduction

Before I discuss the subverting, the ‘queering’ of allonormative tropes and genre expectations in *Loveless*, I want to examine the “additional layer of metatextual critique” (Henderson, *Playing with Genre* 7) that makes these subversions efficient. *Loveless* strategically draws attention to societal and literary norms. It does so both implicitly, by showing the effects of societal and literary allonormative narratives on the protagonist and explicitly, by naming the allonormative expectations put on her. *Loveless* creates a critical awareness in its readers of the genre it inhabits, making them more sensitive to the expectations set and subverted in the novel. *Loveless*.

3.2. Allosexual Normativity

The first norm surrounding attraction that the novel depicts, thus drawing the reader’s attention to it, is the demand for sexual desire and intimacy. The first time this demand is highlighted, is at Georgia’s high school prom. When playing truth or dare, Georgia confesses to never having kissed anyone before, which elicits several adverse reactions. Some of her classmates react with shock:

“There were audible gasps [...] Hattie brought her hand to her mouth and said, horrified, ‘Oh my God, *seriously?*’” (Oseman 15), “It *is* weird, though [...] You’ve got to admit it’s weird to have got to eighteen without having kissed anyone” (Oseman 16), a sentiment later mirrored in Rooney’s reaction of “pure, genuine shock” (Oseman 75) when Georgia tells her the same thing. Some react with pity (Oseman 15; 25) and infantilize her, calling her “pure” and asking her “You’re, like, eighteen, right?” (Oseman 16). Yet others openly ridicule her, laughing at her, coughing ‘virgin’ (Oseman 15). Georgia failing to fit into the allosexual standard gives her negative stigma with her peers.

Through this experience, Georgia –and the reader with her– becomes aware of the allosexual social norms in a way that she is not at the start of the narrative. The novel shows the repercussions that these negative reactions have on Georgia’s mental health. When confessing her lack of sexual experience, Georgia does not expect any negative reactions: reality is not a teen movie; “Virgin-shaming wasn’t *really* a thing” (Oseman 15). After this initial experience, however, she starts to internalize these allonormative notions. She feels behind, thinking that “[everyone] else was growing up, kissing, having sex, falling in love, and I was just . . . I was just a child” (Oseman 16). She is now desperate to kiss someone as soon as possible, “before it was too late”, and to have sex (Oseman 17; 32) to fit in. This internalized pressure for allosexuality plummets her self-esteem. She calls herself a child (Oseman 16), thinks she has failed at being a “real teenager” (32), and feels like she will die alone (32). She is filled with self-hatred for failing to fit into the sexual standard (Oseman 78; 172), feeling like her asexuality is wrong, a “sort of error in [her] programming” (79).

Georgia is not the only character facing (the harmful consequences of) allonormativity, however, several others do too, signaling to the readers that Georgia's experience is not a singular one: the demand for allosexuality is prevalent in society. Jason, for example, confesses to having felt pressured into sexual intimacy before. At his previous school, he "was kind of known as the guy who'd never kissed anyone" (Oseman 168). He tells Georgia that his classmates "all picked on [him] for having never been kissed. [...] Everyone thought it was pretty weird" (Oseman 168). They would tell him he had not kissed anyone yet because he "was ugly" and "had acne" and "liked musical theatre" and other "stupid shit like that" (Oseman 169). Jason ended up transferring schools, getting a girlfriend and having his first kiss soon after. He adds that "it was a shit kiss, but . . . I guess I got it out of the way" (Oseman 169). The novel clearly frames this experience as "really fucking sad" (Oseman 169), condemning the fact that he had "felt pressured into having his first kiss" (Oseman 169).

Aside from Jason, Ellis, too, is treated negatively because of her singleness. Her story is the most extreme depiction of allonormativity, as the novel implies that her parents have sent her to therapy before to 'fix' her asexuality, asking her to think "about trying therapy again" (Oseman 309). They shame her about not having produced a grandchild for them yet, which causes a rift between Ellis and her parents as she fails to live up to their allosexual expectations. The situation makes Georgia wonder if the same might happen to her: "I couldn't imagine seeing Mum and Dad less and less. But maybe that's what would happen to me" (313). Having not just the protagonist, but several other likeable and important characters experiencing these sexual norms shows the reader the prevalence of these norms: it is not just Georgia who is impacted by them, but other characters too –even allosexual ones–.

3.3. Alloromantic Awareness

Aside from allosexual normativity, *Loveless* also depicts and dispels the standardization of romantic attraction and pairings. When Georgia gets made fun of for never having dated, for example, Pip tells Georgia that she will definitely “find someone eventually”, since “[e]veryone does” (Oseman 17), unintentionally reinforcing alloromantic stereotypes. Georgia’s family openly makes fun of her too for her lack of dating experience, making her singleness “an ongoing family joke” (Oseman 307). Even worse, Rooney denies Georgia’s first attempt at coming out, drunkenly telling her that she is ‘giving up’ by accepting this identity (Oseman 275). Georgia acknowledges that she is just trying to help –Rooney is simply worried that Georgia will be “sad and lonely forever” (Oseman 275) if she never dates– but makes it a point to denounce these opinions.

The novel mainly dispels the notion that Georgia will be alone forever through Ellis, for example, who, similar to Georgia, is both aromantic and asexual. Having been raised in the same family as Georgia that holds romantic love to an unreasonably high standard, and identifying similarly, Ellis serves to offer a glimpse inside Georgia’s future as an aroace person. Will she end up alone forever, loveless as the novel’s title ironically implies? Georgia asks Ellis a similar question, and Ellis admits that she has felt this way in the past: “Our family has always been big and loving [...] so that was always what I saw as the norm. [...] In my eyes, dating and relationships were just ... what people did. It was human. So that’s what I tried to do” (Oseman 314). Just like Georgia herself, she keeps hope that she is simply picky, that she has not ‘met the right guy’ yet, or that she is lesbian: “I kept thinking, maybe [...] Maybe never came” (Oseman 315). This conversation with Ellis cancels the ‘eventually’, the assumption that everyone has a ‘right person’ that they should wait for. Ellis also denies the notion that aromantic people are

loveless: “friendship can be just as intense, beautiful and endless as romance [...] I have a lot more love than some people in the world. Even if I’ll never have a wedding” (Oseman 315).

Rooney’s platonic love confession at the end of the novel reflects this sentiment: she tells Georgia that she plans to be with her until they are both old and in a nursing home. Georgia’s life is and will be full of love even without a partner.

3.4. Raising Awareness of Genre Allonormativity

Simply depicting and commenting on societal allonormativity is not enough of a “conversation of recognition between text and reader” (Henderson, *Playing with Genre* 7)” to make the reader attentive to the queer narrative play going on, however. To do so, the novel lays bare the role media has in shaping these expectations, showing the pervasiveness of romantic and sexual normativity in popular culture that denies asexual and aromantic people their happy ending. It is important that a novel does not simply place a queer protagonist “into the role of romantic lead without comment” (Henderson, *Playing with Genre* 7). To ensure that a reader is conscious of the hegemonic –in this case allosexual– conventions within the genre being subverted, a writer can articulate “this horizon of expectation and [enhance] reader familiarity with it”, so that “the subversion that occurs later [...] stands out all the more” (Henderson, *Playing with Genre* 7).

Loveless does not just show allosexual and alloromantic expectations in a vacuum. It draws attention to how these norms are both reflected in and shaped by allonormative genre conventions in media and literature. This creates a metafictional awareness of the conventions played with in the novel that makes the subversions all the more effective.

There are several instances where the reader’s attention is explicitly directed towards existing allonormative tropes. There are references to media depicting the urgency script, a sexual script

that the novel itself uses and subverts (see section 4.2.): “It really got to me in that moment. [...] The movies where the main characters freaked out about being virgins at the age of sixteen” (Oseman 75). *Loveless* also addresses the ubiquity of romantic love stories, romances, another genre subverted in the novel: “It [i.e. not being able to have a romantic partner] was hard to forget, though, when every single song that was playing overhead was about romantic love” (Oseman 260). Aside from drawing attention to the allonormativity in the specific genres that the novel subverts, *Loveless* also addresses the lack of asexual representation –cf. Georgia’s remark that she’d “hardly ever heard people use the word [asexual] in real life, or even on TV or in movies” (Oseman 195)–, highlighting explicitly how allonormative fiction as a whole is.

Loveless shows how this lack of representation can become problematic when queer teenagers use it as their frame of reference. Georgia regularly equates her life to stories: “I felt like I was in *The Secret History* or some other [...] university drama where there’s lots of sex and murder”, “If our lives were in a movie, at least two of us would have got together” (Oseman 12; 15). This causes issues when Georgia tries to apply these allonormative fictional standards to her life. She dates Jason, for example, thinking maybe they “were meant to be like the two leads from *13 Going On 30* or *Easy A*, maybe ‘he’d been there all along” (Oseman 115). Rooney, too, spurs her on, telling her that Georgia’s relationship with Jason is ‘like a movie’ (Oseman 129). These stories and their imbedded allonormativity implicitly pressure her to follow an alloromantic, allosexual path, as “[for] someone who equates maturity, fitting in, and happiness with the familiar ‘bible of expectations’ of the romance plot, not being able to fall in love sounds like a curse” (Henderson, Genre-savvy Protagonist 2): romance “is assumed to be central and crucial to a satisfying narrative (Henderson, Genre-savvy Protagonist 3).

However, as much as Georgia tries to fit into the romance plots that she reads “[like] an obsessive researcher” (Oseman 25), these stories are inaccessible and unrealizable for an asexual and aromantic person like her. The lack of asexual and aromantic narratives in popular media denies Georgia her happy ending. Whereas Georgia loves love stories at the beginning of the novel, she grows resentful of them upon realizing her inability to fall in love, stating she is “angry at every single romance movie, every single fanfic, every single stupid OTP that had made me crave finding the perfect romance” (Oseman 198). The inherent allonormativity makes her, as an aromantic person, feel estranged. The final play in the story shows how Georgia and her friends start to adapt old works to be more inclusive of stories like hers. They perform a medley of Shakespeare plays focused on love of all kinds: “Pure, toxic, romantic, platonic”, wanting to “explore all sorts [of love]” (Oseman 425).

3.5. Conclusion

Loveless repeatedly shows how characters are being pressured by allosexual and alloromantic normativity. The novel highlights that people who cannot fit into these norms face negative repercussions such as being made fun of by peers or being alienated by family. In doing so, the novel openly condemns these allonormative notions and negates their validity by showing the flaws within these ways of thinking (by, for example, correcting the notion that aromantic people are loveless). The novel shows how these fallacious norms are reflected in literature and emphasizes that these norms do not hold up when they are implemented in real life and met with an asexual, aromantic individual. This explicit naming of (the harmful nature of) these norms and how they are reflected in and shaped by literature creates a metafictional awareness of the allonormative conventions in the genres that the novel itself uses. This awareness makes the

eventual subversion of said allonormative conventions all the more effective, as readers are more likely to be sensitive to the novel's generic play with allonormativity.

4. Subversion as a Queer Strategy

4.1. Introduction

Tison Pugh asserts that “selecting a genre for a tale can reveal ulterior, if not downright hostile, motives” (Pugh 117-118). It is notable then, that *Loveless* specifically makes use of those genres and conventions that are inherently allonormative: the coming of age story and the romance. In this section, I will look at *Loveless*'s approach to these genres and the overarching conventions of the sexual script. I will argue that the novel uses queer narrative play –subverts readers' expectations– to destabilize and decenter allonormative notions, offering new asexual and aromantic ways to approach these narratives.

More specifically, I will first examine how *Loveless* subverts and ultimately discredits the urgency script and with it sexual scripts as a whole. Then, I will argue that *Loveless* desexualizes the concept of ‘maturity’ in the coming of age genre. Lastly, I will explain how the novel shows the limits of the traditional romance and instead queers the genre to fit aromantic narratives by centering platonic love instead.

4.2. Canceling the Sexual Script

4.2.1. *Introduction*

Loveless's exposition is reminiscent of narratives centering on the urgent achievement of sexual intimacy. Narratives that the characters themselves are familiar with and reference several times: “why are, like, most teen movies focused around the fact that teenagers feel like they're going to

die if they don't lose their virginity" (Oseman 396). Maura Kelly refers to these narratives as 'urgency scripts' in her framework regarding virginity-loss narratives in teen dramas. The novel uses several signposts to evoke expectations of an urgency script but ultimately subverts these expectations by cancelling the script. In doing so, the novel shows the harmful, exclusionary nature of the urgency script, as well as sexual scripts as a whole. Sexual scripts are rigid and inflexible. Their inherent allosexuality makes them fall apart when met with an asexual protagonist. Georgia getting her happy-ever-after while being asexual, offers a way to more flexibly structure narratives without having to adhere to any sexual script, denying their usefulness as a whole.

4.2.2. *Sexual Scripts*

Based on Carpenter's 2005 findings that people tend to metaphorically refer to virginity as a gift, stigma, or a rite of passage, Maura Kelly maps three sexual scripts commonly used in teen dramas: the abstinence, management, and urgency script. For the concept of sexual scripts, she relies on Gagnon and Simon's 1973 definition: "socially learned sets of sexual desires and conduct that guide people's choices about when, where, how, why and with whom they should be sexual" (220). Each script has its own "cohesive sets of themes for each script" (Kelly 482). The management script centers on how characters handle (the risks of) the act of virginity loss (by showing the characters using protection, for example). The abstinence script portrays "the social control of teenage sexuality in which sexual behavior is delayed and risk is controlled" (Kelly 482). A narrative adhering to the abstinence script might show characters who are waiting until marriage to lose their virginity, for example. The urgency script, which we will focus on in this discussion, displays the loss of virginity as "not only a highly enjoyable activity but as necessary

to affirm a gendered identity as a sexually sought-after individual, to be perceived by others as desirable, and to achieve social status" (Kelly 482). The urgency script foregrounds several themes: "(a) stigma of virginity, (b) deception about sexual history and desperation to have sex, and (c) positive consequences and increased status for successful virginity loss and negative consequences for unsuccessful virginity-loss attempts" (Kelly 482).

4.2.3. *Signaling the Urgency Script*

To subvert the urgency script, the novel has to signpost itself as one first. In this section, we will go through the several themes associated with the urgency script –as discussed in Kelly’s framework– to show how the novel positions itself as one. Georgia’s classmates’ negative reactions of pity, disbelief, infantilization and disgust, as discussed in section 3.2 clearly demonstrate theme (a): the stigma associated with being a virgin. Sex as being “necessary to affirm a gendered identity as a sexually sought-after individual, to be perceived by others as desirable” (Kelly 482) is also present. In particular, Jason’s lack of sexual and romantic experience gives him negative stigma. He is bullied relentlessly by his classmates, and told that he “was ugly and [...] had acne and [he] liked musical theater” (Oseman 169) and that this is why he had not had any romantic or sexual experience yet. Georgia herself has similar doubts, wondering if she is “ugly and shy and disgusting and that was why [she] hadn’t kissed anyone yet” (Oseman 16). Another person who experiences obvious negative stigma due to their asexuality is Ellis. Her parents shame her for not having produced a grandchild for them and suggest therapy again after having previously forced her to see a therapist. As a result, Ellis becomes increasingly estranged from both her parents and family.

Although Georgia does not lie about being a virgin as theme (b) suggests, she does experience the “desperation to have sex” (Kelly 482). Georgia’s internal pressure to be sexually intimate is immediately noticeable. As mentioned earlier, the novel’s first chapter is titled Last Chance, referring to the idea that Georgia’s graduation prom was her final opportunity to kiss her crush and experience romance in high school, indicating an urgency to be sexually and romantically involved. This carries over into the rest of the novel, with her increasingly pressuring herself to “experience the magic of romance”, since she “felt like if [she] couldn’t change and make it happen at university, it’d never happen at all” (Oseman 39). When going back to Jason’s dorm, she tells herself she “could go back to a boy’s room on a date and do whatever was usually involved in that. Talking. Flirting. Kissing. Sex” (Oseman 167), even if she obviously feels disgusted by any sexual intimacy. This mimics Kelly’s observation that, in an urgency script, a character’s desire for sex can be “social rather than physical in nature” (486).

Theme (c), the negative or positive consequences attached to, respectively, unsuccessful and successful virginity loss is only briefly portrayed when Georgia fails to kiss Tommy, accidentally causing him to fall into a fire pit (unscathed): Tommy is angry and in shock, while Georgia’s friend Pip questions her, not understanding her rejection and reinforces allonormative notions. These reactions reflect Georgia’s earlier worries that she had to successfully kiss Tommy, then have sex, date him and move in together after university, because “[if she couldn’t], what would Pip and Jason say?” (Oseman 25).

4.2.4. *Subversion of the Sexual Script*

Loveless clearly initially evokes expectations associated with the urgency script, reminiscent of movies such as *Easy A*. However, as the novel progresses, it starts to deviate from this script.

Ultimately, *Loveless* shows that the urgency script is harmful, exclusionary and unattainable for several people. Georgia herself notes that she does not understand “why [...] most teen movies focused around the fact that teenagers feel like they’re going to die if they don’t lose their virginity?” (Oseman 396), realizing immediately that “Oh. This is an asexual thing [...] I forgot other people are obsessed with having sex” (Oseman 396). This stands in ironic contrast to Georgia’s own desperation to be sexually intimate to fit in earlier. The novel shows the negative consequences of this desperation –this urgency–, however. Georgia’s internalized allosexual pressure causes her to be physically intimate when she is not yet comfortable, leading to her accidentally pushing someone into a firepit (Oseman 27), hurting her best friend Jason (Oseman 232) and destroying her friendship with Pip and Rooney (Oseman 280; 289).

Georgia tries multiple times to initiate sexual intimacy to reduce the stigma of her virginity but fails continuously, ruining her relationships and making her feel alienated and weird, as if she failed at being human. The novel openly condemns the urgency script, calling out Jason’s own adherence to the urgency script as not being funny, but “really fucking sad” (Oseman 169). *Loveless* thus openly condemns the urgency scrip, proving that it can be harmful to the individual feeling pressured by it, as well as to others should the individual give into the pressure without actually wanting to be intimate. The novel calls off the urgency script by showing these negative repercussions. Having sexual intimacy is not the ‘solution’ here. It is not even an option. Any pursuit of sexual intimacy out of ‘urgency’ actually worsens her situation, showing the flaws of the urgency script.

The novel does not only call off the urgency script, however, it questions sexual scripts as a whole. As Georgia lacks sexual attraction and desire, the social pressure weighing on her is the

only factors pushing her to want to kiss and have sex. Sex is simply not physically desirable to or safely possible for Georgia. This possibility is not factored into the urgency script (or any sexual script for that matter), causing the entire script to collapse when Georgia repeatedly feels waves of disgust washing over her at any sort of sexual intimacy. The novel cancels the allonormative supposition that sex is an inevitable part of being human. Sexual intimacy in this novel is not something to be managed, rushed into or abstained from, nor is it unavoidable. If anything, intimacy according to *Loveless* is meant to be an option, where the individual is in full charge of when, how, with whom and if they are sexually intimate, which is fundamentally contrary to any sexual 'script'. Importantly, Georgia's lack of sexual attraction is never framed as admirable either; the urgency script never turns into an abstinence script, where virginity is praised. Rooney serves to illustrate this point: she regularly stays the night with guys and hooks up with Pip at the end of the novel, none of which is ever demonized. Engaging in sexual intimacy is portrayed as a choice above anything else.

4.2.5. Conclusion

By giving Georgia her happy ending without denying her asexuality, the novel calls off sexual scripts as a whole. An urgency script is initially evoked through several narrative clues: her desperation to be physically intimate, the negative stigma attached to virginity. the script is subverted and ultimately abandoned when Georgia's attempts at sexual intimacy only worsen her situation and she fails to stick to its allosexual standards. Instead, only a narrative without any sexual intimacy can bring Georgia her happy ending. The rigidity and allonormativity of sexual scripts as a whole are subsequently questioned. The scripts are inadequate when talking about queer and particularly asexual narratives, as the underlying assumption that sex is desirable or

enjoyable excludes an already marginalized group and encourages harmful practices, such as Georgia's attempts at sexual intimacy that ruin her mental health and her relationships. By at first adhering to the conventions of the sexual script and later subverting them by showing their flaws and the repercussions of these narratives when applied universally, *Loveless* calls for a more flexible and inclusive way of portraying sexuality, not as a gift, not as a rite of passage, not as a stigma, but as a choice above all else.

4.3. Expanding the Coming-of-Age Novel

4.3.1. Introduction

The coming-of-age novel assumes a particularly interesting position in a thesis about queering conventions, as it is a genre commonly used to express queer narratives. Sarah Graham remarks that this is due to the nature of 'coming out' : "‘coming out’ stories (about the revelation of non-normative sexuality or gender identity) typically incorporate the motifs of coming of age" (Graham 139). It is ironic, then, that a genre commonly used to express queerness still needs to be 'queered'. The coming-of-age novel is still deeply rooted within allosexuality, reflecting the assumption of allosexuality even within the queer community; the "perception that asexuality is 'not queer enough' to warrant inclusion in queer spaces in the first place" (Canning paraphrased in Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 3). This absence of asexual narratives in a genre typically used to express queerness thus emphasizes the unique position of asexuality within the queer community, showing exactly why it is still necessary to subvert allonormative genres to claim asexuality.

Whereas *Loveless* completely discards sexual scripts through the initial use and eventual rejection of the urgency script, the novel subverts the coming-of-age story in such a way that it

remains intact, though expanded to fit these left-out asexual narratives. The novel codes itself as a coming-of-age novel by adhering to various of its prominent features, but omits any sexual connotation to the eventual achievement of ‘maturity’. This opens the genre up for more diverse, queer storylines, showing how a ‘coming of age’ narrative can function without a sexual awakening. In doing so, *Loveless* helps establish what Alex Henderson calls the “uniquely asexual coming-of-age story” (Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 10). By incorporating asexual narratives in a genre as prevalent and established as the coming-of-age drama, *Loveless* and other asexual coming-of-age novels such as *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* help normalize asexuality.

4.3.2. *Loveless as a Coming-of-Age Novel*

To argue that *Loveless* expands the coming-of-age novel to fit asexual narratives, it is important to establish how the novel positions itself as a coming-of-age novel first. In this section, I will talk about the many ways in which *Loveless* adheres to the genre and its conventions. A first feature coding the novel as a coming-of-age story is its setting. Starting at Georgia’s high school graduation prom, *Loveless* follows Georgia’s transition into university life. The setting thus marks a “transitional [space]” that underlines “the shifting state” of Georgia’s world as she “step[s] into adulthood” (Henderson, Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 9). This spatial move from high school to university reflects Georgia moving away from her childhood, her home town, to her adolescent life, away at university. The end of high school marks the end of Georgia’s blissful unawareness of the social norms held around sexuality. Georgia encounters new ideologies and new aspects of her identity, while she, similarly, encounters the new environment that is Durham University. The change in setting reflects her development; the changes in her personal life. Throughout the novel, she has to navigate and adapt to both her first year of university and her newfound asexual, aromantic identity. These “university anxieties” (Henderson, Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 9) are

a staple in “the world of the coming-of-age drama” (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 9), thus clearly signposting the novel as a coming-of-age drama.

A second way in which *Loveless* adheres to the coming-of-age genre is through its “shifting dynamics between the maturing protagonist and their family” (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 9). Georgia’s relationship with her parents remains the same throughout the novel but her sense of alienation within her family as a whole grows when she realizes she will never live up to their expectations of ‘perfect love’. Simultaneously, Georgia’s bond with her cousin Ellis, who experiences the same expectations and subsequent alienation, grows stronger as they both share their stories. When going back home for her winter break, Georgia finds her entire family “congregated at [her] house” (Oseman 302) for Christmas. Georgia’s grandma asks her if she has “met any nice young *men*” (Oseman 304), and her family converse “about how easy it [is] to get into a relationship at uni” (Oseman 304). When Georgia denies having a boyfriend, stating that she does not desire want one currently, her family starts to make continuous jokes about her singleness. Georgia notes that she does not blame them, since they “had been raised to believe that it was a girl’s primary aim in life to get married and have a family” (Oseman 303). Nevertheless, she feels so annoyed at their continuous remarks that she wants to scream. Through these continuous remarks, the family slowly and inadvertently alienate Georgia, damaging their bond with her. It is Ellis then, who catches Georgia’s eyes and rolls her eyes in support, making Georgia realize she might have an ally in her family after all. When Ellis fights with her parents over her asexuality and aromanticism, Georgia comforts her, ultimately coming out to Ellis herself. Georgia and Ellis become each other’s support system within this family that strongly “believe[s] in *forever love*” (Oseman 8). Georgia’s status with the rest of the family is less stable: she feels alienated by their allonormative remarks and does not come out to them yet, making her wonder if

she will become estranged from her parents; if her parents will make her get therapy, like her aunt and uncle made Ellis do.

“Platonic conflict” (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 9) is a third convention typically associated within the coming-of-age genre that *Loveless* clearly adheres to. Georgia has two best friends at the start of the novel that she comes in conflict with due to her shifting self-perception: Pip and Jason. Georgia finds a third best friend in her roommate Rooney. All three of these friendships are in jeopardy throughout the novel, as Georgia makes plenty of mistakes on her journey to self-discovery and self-acceptance. She starts dating Jason when she realizes that he has feelings for her and continues to date him despite knowing that she does not actually like him romantically; she is just forcing herself to. She knows that she is “going to end up hurting him” (Oseman 171), but she does not communicate her feelings clearly to him, holding on to the hope that “if [she] just held on for a little bit longer, [they] would fall in love, and [she] would not hate [her]self any more” (Oseman 171).

When they kiss, however, she is not able to hide her disdain, he asks her if she is attracted to her, and she is unable to lie to him. Jason, hurt, tells her that Georgia needs to leave him alone for now. Georgia’s friendships with Pip and Rooney similarly collapse because of a kiss. At Durham’s Bailey Ball, Georgia comes out as aromantic and asexual to Rooney, who convinces Georgia to kiss her to prove that she is not just ‘giving up’ too early. Georgia rejects this notion, but is persuaded nonetheless, still desperate to rid herself of her asexuality, so they kiss. At this point, it is established that Pip has a crush on Rooney, so when Pip sees the two of them kiss, they argue and Pip storms off, ignoring both of them from this point onward. The kiss also temporarily ruins Georgia and Rooney’s friendship, as Georgia feels invalidated by Rooney’s dismissal of her coming out. They quickly make up, however, as Rooney apologizes for her behavior and seriously

hears Georgia out for the first time, accepting Georgia's asexual and aromantic identity. The 'platonic conflicts' with Pip and Jason wrap up with two separate grand gestures informed by their history together, before they all talk their respective issues out.

4.3.3. *Adapting the Coming-of-Age Novel*

Loveless clearly positions itself as a coming-of-age novel through its use of transitional spaces reflecting the character's internal development and through the shifting family dynamics and platonic conflicts that result from Georgia's changing values, identity and self-perception. The novel diverts from the coming-of-age drama's genre expectations, however, in its "themes of sexuality and selfhood" (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 9). Identity and selfhood are key themes in *Loveless*, as the novel's main concern is Georgia coming to terms with her queer identity. However, themes of sexuality imply sexual acts and 'awakenings', whereas Georgia's coming of age centers around asexuality, the absence of such sexual acts and desires. This absence of sexual desire in a narrative centering a protagonist's coming of age detaches (the road to) maturity from its sexual connotation and creates space for asexual interpretations of adulthood and adolescence.

Coming of age is often seen as an innately sexual process, especially in "Western societies", where sex and sexualities are "regarded [...] as 'natural' and 'necessary' parts of adolescence, and [are] widely used to symbolise the border crossing between adolescence and adulthood" (Kennon 4). According to this view, adolescence, "like the categories of gay and lesbian, cannot be untangled from sex, from desire, from the vulnerability that results from being defined so visibly by one's sexuality" (Owen 114). In short, sex is seen as essential to the process of maturing, becoming a full-fledged adult. This view is reflected in Young Adult novels, where the teenage characters "agonize about every aspect of human sexuality" (Trites 84 qtd. in Kennon

4). For them, too, sexuality “marks a rite of passage that helps define themselves as having left childhood behind” (Trites 84 qtd. in Kennon 4). *Loveless* acknowledges this standard through Georgia who asks Rooney if she thinks Georgia is immature “[b]ecause I haven’t had sex or kissed anyone or . . . any of that” (Oseman 117), creating awareness of this association of maturity with sexuality. What happens, then, when the one thing seen as absolutely necessary in the process of coming of age cannot be present in a coming-of-age novel?

In Georgia’s case, maturity means accepting her identity and being confident enough in this identity to not hurt others because of her self-denial and -loathing. Maturity, thus, is not sexual but rather a state of self-acceptance and -assurance. A state of self-acceptance that, in this case, entails a complete absence of sexual desire instead of a coming into a sexual self. More specifically, Georgia’s journey of selfhood and identity spans from her initial discovery and denial to her eventual acceptance of her aromantic, asexual identity. Throughout the novel, she has to learn to grapple with and eventually accept the fact that she experiences no romantic or sexual attraction. In this process, she has to let go of her allonormative expectations and desires regarding her future. She has to realize that her future will never include a romantic partner, nor any sex, and accept that getting older without those factors is just as worthy a course of life. That is Georgia’s personal coming of age.

Georgia’s final point of development, her maturity, lies in her coming to terms with her aromantic, asexual identity and the implications that this identity has for her and her future. Georgia starts the novel off desperate to experience her own spark, her own tale of attraction and romance. She spends the majority of the novel wishing for this spark so desperately that she would rather hurt her friends for the slight possibility that she might find it than let go of this idea. The idea of growing old without a romantic partner frightens her: “I was grieving this fake life, a

fantasy future that I was never going to live. I had no idea what my life would be like now. And that scared me. God, that scared me so, so much” (Oseman 234). Still, with a lot of help from her friends, and some new-found wisdom from her cousin Ellis, she is able to stop herself from seeing her identity as a loss. The novel ends with Georgia’s final form: she is surrounded by friends and likely will be forever because of Rooney’s promise to grow old together. Georgia’s development is not a sexual awakening that brings her closer to her love interest. It is a quiet but steadfast faith in her friends and the love she will always have, even without a love interest. It is the realization that she is not broken, or subhuman, but that her asexuality and aromanticism are simply parts of herself.

4.3.4. Conclusion

By consistently positioning itself as a coming-of-age story, but refusing to give in to the expectations of awakening sexuality tied into the genre, *Loveless* adapts the genre to allow for alternative narratives, creating space for asexuality to exist in these popular stories. Additionally, the novel “interweave[s] familiar genre conventions with uniquely queer—and uniquely asexual—stories, normalising the identity by locating it amidst familiar [...] tropes”, while “also featuring plot elements and themes unique to their protagonists’ asexuality” (Henderson, Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 9). In this way, *Loveless* can be added to a list of novels that help create “the concept of a uniquely asexual coming-of-age story” (Henderson, Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 10), such as *Let’s Talk About Love* and *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*. Exploring these asexual stories in a typically allosexual genre centered around the transition into adulthood is a strategy that, as Henderson notes, can help “normalise asexuality as simply another way to experience adolescence rather than something pathological or abnormal” (Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 2).

4.4. Recontextualizing the Romance Formula

4.4.1. *Introduction*

Loveless references and exploits the romance and its conventions more than any other convention listed above. The novel continuously references popular romance tropes explicitly, putting *Loveless* in conversation with other texts that follow these patterns and making readers aware of the conventions within this frame of reference. Georgia lists her “favourite fanfiction tropes”, which include “[s]chool romance”, but also “soulmate AU, coffee shop AU, hurt/comfort and temporary amnesia” (Oseman 22). She likens the plot of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* to an “enemies-to-lovers fanfic, with a lot of confusion and miscommunication along the way” (Oseman 205) – a plot that is shockingly similar to Pip and Rooney’s progression as love interests, exemplified in them playing Beatrice and Benedick, who are love interests in *Much Ado About Nothing*–. Georgia even notes that Rooney’s behavior is “shockingly similar to [...] when she wasn’t acting” (Oseman 207). This level of metafictional referencing to the conventions being used, and how *Loveless* mimics these formulas draws extra attention to *Loveless*’s subversions of the romance genre.

While reading part one of *Loveless*, a reader might expect the novel to be a simple, trope-filled Young Adult romance: the novel immediately uses structural and thematic conventions to raise the expectations of an alloromantic romance. However, instead of adhering to these expectations and giving Georgia a ‘happily ever after’ that is tied to a romantic partner, the novel shows the limits of the alloromantic romance story: not everyone experiences romantic attraction. By setting up the expectations of a romance but not having Georgia end up with a romantic partner, the novel corrects the rampant misguided stereotype that everyone finds romantic love eventually; that it is simply a matter of finding the right person or waiting long enough. It is only by pursuing the

possibility, by initially leaning into this narrative and having the protagonist actively pursue this romantic ideal only to fail again and again that this allonormative idea of the ‘right’ person can be fully and definitively denied.

This is not the only subversive use of the romance in *Loveless*, however. The novel makes it a point to discredit the stereotype that aromantic people are loveless human beings by ‘aromanticizing’ the romance formula to include other love stories, in this case, platonic ones. In doing so, the novel decenters romantic love to make space for platonic love stories, creating a more inclusive genre more that is also accessible to aromantic people.

4.4.2. *The Limits of the Alloromantic Romance*

Through structural and thematical conventions, *Loveless* initially introduces itself as a typical romance. *Loveless* is focalized through Georgia, an adolescent female protagonist, and uses her as a homodiegetic, first-person narrator and focalizer. These structural features adhere to Young Adult romance conventions as they “usually focus on a love relationship, usually from the first-person perspective of a young female protagonist” (Younger 108). Thematically, the novel sets Georgia’s inexperience in romance –her never having been in love– up as its central problem: Georgia indicates that she “[wants] to feel a little bit of prom-night magic” (Oseman 5), the “teenage-dream excitement and youthful magic that everyone else seemed to have a little taste of” (Oseman 7). This once again sets readers expectations up for a romance. Traditionally, this central, pressing problem of finding Georgia a partner would be solved when she unexpectedly finds love with someone. They would face challenges, obstacles, and miscommunication but eventually, they would find their ‘happy ever after’. Think of movies like *Amélie*, for example, where a protagonist who has always longed for love and connection, finds her romantic partner in an unexpected place.

Loveless presents us with several potential suitors, drawing on popular storylines in romances. Georgia remarks that Rooney could be her ‘endgame’, for example. It would be a “[r]oommate romance like in a fanfiction. This was university, for God’s sake. Anything could happen” (Oseman 67). Additionally, when debating whether to go to a Pride Society event or not, Georgia muses that “Maybe [she]’d go to the Pride Society, see a girl, have a big lesbian awakening, and finally feel some romantic feelings for another human being. I was sure I’d read a fanfic with that exact plot” (Oseman 91). The novel evokes more general ideal, alloromantic romance endings too. Georgia fantasizes about her ideal wedding, for example: “a barn wedding, with autumn leaves and berries, fairy lights and candles, my dress – lacy and vintage-looking, my soon-to-be-spouse crying, my family crying, me crying because I’m so, so happy, just, so happy that I have found the one” (Oseman 8), and when talking to Tommy, Georgia remarks that she “knew what was supposed to happen next. [She] was supposed to lean in, nervous, but excited, and he’d brush [her] hair out of [her] face and [she]’d look up at him beneath my eyelashes and then we’d kiss, gently, and we’d be one” (Oseman 25). She goes on to list out her future with him: they would meet again, start dating, have sex after a couple of weeks and move in together after university (Oseman 25). These alternative endings, although they are never actually pursued, show Georgia in a prototypical happy ending with meet-cutes, sparks, and a forever-after. But how can one be sure that, if pursued, these romantic arcs will not be successful?

To expel any doubt that Georgia cannot have her happily ever after with a romantic partner, the novel shows what would happen if Georgia did seek out a romantic relationship. This romantic relationship is found in Jason, one of Georgia’s long-standing best friends. *Loveless* quickly establishes Jason as a potential love interest. The novel quickly and not so subtly hints that he has a crush on Georgia –cf. the “flash of sadness” (Oseman 11) on Jason’s face when Georgia

reaffirms her ‘crush’ on Tommy–, ensuring a loving partner that is actually romantically interested in her. Furthermore, the novel explicitly makes readers aware of their romantic potential by acknowledging that “[i]f [Georgia, Pip and Jason’s] lives were in a movie, at least two of [them] would have got together” (Oseman 12). Any attempts to make this romantic pairing work fail, however.

On paper, Jason is the perfect match for Georgia: Georgia already loves and trusts him as a friend. They have “known each other for years” and “already had dozens, if not hundreds, of deep chats. [They] were already at the point where silence didn’t feel awkward” (Oseman 134). On their first date, Jason picks a cute café “straight out of a romance novel” (Oseman 133), and they are able to talk honestly and comfortably as they always do. Georgia herself notes that if she “was going to be [falling in love] with anyone, it was probably going to be with him” (Oseman 134). Once again, she connects these experiences to fiction, referencing the best friends-to-lovers trope: “maybe Jason and I were *meant to be* like the two leads from *13 Going On 30* or *Easy A*, maybe ‘he’d been there all along’, maybe I just hadn’t tapped into my romantic feelings because I felt so comfortable and safe around Jason and I’d just written him off as ‘best friend’” (Oseman 115).

Similarly to how the protagonists of *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* and *Let’s Talk About Love* feel pressured to experiment sexually thinking their “asexuality can be ‘fixed’ by the right person or experience” (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 10), Georgia feels pressured to date Jason. She hopes that “if [she] just held on for a little bit longer, [they] would fall in love, and [she] would not hate [her]self any more” (Oseman 171). However, just like *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* and *Let’s Talk About Love*, this notion “is disproven and this trope avoided [...] when this experience only ends up confirming the protagonists’ asexuality” (Oseman 10), or, in this case, Georgia’s aromanticism. Dating Jason only confirms to Georgia that she is not demisexual, nor in

denial: even if she tried, even if Jason was the perfect partner, romantic love is inaccessible to her. Although Georgia loves Jason dearly, and although they function really well as friends, Georgia cannot be happy while being in a relationship with him.

The explicit mentions of tropes and alternative endings stand in sharp contrast with the events actually unfolding in the novel. Georgia's best friends-to-lovers fantasy collapses. She never meets a cute girl at the Pride Society with whom she falls in love either. The romance conventions are juxtaposed with Georgia's reality as an aromantic individual. This distinction between fiction and reality is reflected upon several times: "It was fun to read about it [i.e. getting fingered] in fanfics and see in movies, but the reality was kind of just like, *Oh. Yikes. I'm uncomfortable, get me out of here*" (Oseman 18). When talking about Tommy, she mentions that the possibility of school romance –one of her favorite fanfiction tropes– happening being "more than zero" freaks her out (Oseman 22). These confessions highlight how far asexual and aromantic people are usually removed from genres such as romance. Aromantic people have been denied access to this alloromantic genre. So how would one make the romance genre, allonormative by definition, more inclusive for aromantic people?

4.4.3. *Aromanticizing the Romance Formula*

Loveless answers this question by transforming the romance to be about love more generally, separate from purely romantic love, reflecting "the asexual community's emphasis on non-sexual emotional intimacy and the importance of platonic relationships" (Decker; Roach summarized in Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 11). Henderson states that "[s]ometimes the playful, queer subversion comes not from removing those traditional expectations of queer narrative, but by stubbornly proving that they can exist alongside story elements that would usually be considered heteronarrative" (Playing with Genre 7). In this case,

aromanticism stubbornly co-exists alongside the allonarrative romance formula, constituting the subversive narrative play. “[F]amiliar aspects of the YA romance plotline—love triangles, ‘meet cute’ moments, climactic declarations of love, etc.—” (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 15) are present while still remaining aromantic. By transforming these typically romantic story elements into platonic storylines, creates a new type of narrative, an aromanticized, platonic romance.

From the very beginning of the novel, the affection between Georgia and her friends is apparent, setting platonic love up as a key theme in the novel. When Georgia jokingly asks if Pip will no longer love her because she was not able to get Pip the marshmallows she wanted, Pip makes sure to remind her earnestly that she “*do[es]* fucking love [her]” (Oseman 4). Pip and her have been friends for seven years and, although Jason and Georgia had “met each other later”, they “bonded faster than [Georgia]’d ever thought possible” (Oseman 12). They had had “what felt like a thousand sleepovers with each other (Oseman 13)” and knew each other’s favorite mugs and movies. One of the first observations Georgia makes about their bond is that it is “Stronger, maybe, than a lot of couples [she] knew” (Oseman 13). When the friends are separated for what could not be more than a few days, they run towards each other “in what felt like slow-mo with the *Chariots of Fire* music playing in the background” (Oseman 57).

However, despite Georgia’s declaration that “[n]othing could ruin what [they] had” (Oseman 53), the novel would not be a true romance if there were no obstacles. After the events discussed in section 3.4. –Georgia dating Jason without actually liking him romantically and Georgia drunkenly kissing Rooney to prove a point–, both Pip and Jason’s friendship with Georgia are in jeopardy, leading to a typical third-act breakup. It is only in this separation that Georgia is able to recognize just how much Pip and Jason mean to her: “I had been so desperate for my idea

of true love that I couldn't even see it when it was right in front of my face" (Oseman 301). Her internal monologue mirrors that of a romantic confession: "I loved Pip's stupid sense of humour and how she immediately made every room she entered a happier place. I loved how Jason knew exactly what to say when you were upset and could always calm you down. I loved Jason and Pip" (Oseman 301). With Ellis' advice to "[g]ive [her] friendships the magic you would give a romance. Because they're just as important [as romantic love]. Actually, for us [i.e. asexual and aromantic people] they're *way* more important" (Oseman 318) and with a push and support from Sunil, Georgia sets out to make things right.

Loveless also adheres to the romance convention of "climactic declarations of love" (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 15) in an aromantic way, 'queering' it. Georgia conveys her platonic love for Jason and Pip through two individualized grand love declarations, winning their friendship back. Sunil convinces Jason, who has repeatedly been shown to love Scooby-Doo (Oseman 59, 167), to attend one of the Shakespeare Society meetings again after having taken a break from them. He is shocked to see Rooney, Georgia and Sunil all dressed up in Scooby-Doo costumes, carrying a pug plushy to fill the role of the titular dog. They have a spare Fred costume for Jason to wear to a 'fancy-dress club' happening that night (Oseman 339). When Jason realizes what they are all doing, he starts laughing uncontrollably. The gesture shows that Georgia knows Jason and his interests intimately. They all go out together that night, as team Scooby-Doo, and talk the whole situation out, acknowledging that grand gestures do not suffice without addressing the actual (root of the) problem. They acknowledge that they still love each other. Jason even remarks that the only reason why Georgia thought she could fall in love romantically with Jason, is because she "*do[es]* love [him]. Not in a romantic way, but just as strongly" (Oseman 344).

Similarly, Pip's 'declaration of love' is set up early on in the novel, when Pip gushes about 'college marriage' proposals. She fantasizes about a proposal where someone "showers [her] with confetti then recites a poem to me on a boat in front of a hundred onlookers before releasing a pair of doves into the sky" (Oseman 67). This might seem like an insignificant detail at that point but when Georgia is looking for a way to make up with Pip, she remembers this conversation. Knowing that Pip particularly likes those dramatic gestures, she copies Pip's dream scenario, albeit without the confetti and the doves. Instead of reciting poetry, she sings Pip's favorite song, 'Your song', with Jess and Sunil accompanying her on the viola and Cello, Rooney playing the triangle and Jason rowing the boat. Grand gestures like these are a staple in romantic comedies. They show that Georgia has been listening. That she knows her friend, and that she cares about what she likes. Once again, however, the love declaration is followed up with good communication, solidifying their relationship.

The platonic romance that is most apparent, however, is between Rooney and Pip. The 'roommate romance' of Georgia's fantasy might be platonic in nature, not romantic, but Rooney does become Georgia's 'endgame'. Janice Radway interviews several avid readers of the romance novel, dubbed the 'Smithton women' for her renowned book, *Reading the Romance*. She notes that these readers "placed heavy emphasis on the importance of development in the romance's portrayal of love" (Radway 65). In general, they expected "two people who come together for one reason or another, grow to love each other and work together solving problems along the way—united for a purpose" (Radway 65); a "growing awareness, the culmination of the love [...] they [the heroine and the hero] have recognized that they have fallen in love" (Radway 65).

Georgia and Rooney's storyline perfectly fit this description of the romance genre. Georgia and Rooney 'come together' as roommates, initially united in their purpose to find Georgia a

lover. Their relationship slowly develops: although they are polar opposites of each other –Rooney is social, often spends nights out and has a “sort of happy, bubbly persona” (Oseman 44), whereas Georgia is introverted, keeps to her best friends and prefers to stay in with a story or a fanfic–, they slowly learn to trust each other, until they become each other’s main source of comfort. Rooney lets her walls down and confides in Georgia about her toxic ex-boyfriend, trusting a friend for the first time in years. Georgia, who “never cried in front of anyone” (Oseman 410), cries in front of Rooney when they reunite after Rooney’s short disappearance.

Georgia slowly realizes how much Rooney has come to mean to her: “I really did care about her, despite how different we were and how we probably wouldn’t have ever spoken if we hadn’t been roomed together [...] I liked the way she’d always genuinely wanted to help me [...] I liked having her in my life (Oseman 355). The two of them ‘work together solving problems along the way’: they make up after their kissing mistake, support each other when both of them have lost their support system and work together to win Pip and Jason over again.

Georgia and Rooney “[recognize] that they have fallen in love” (Radway 65) and communicate this to each other in a climactic confession scene at the end of the novel. When Rooney disappears right before Shakespeare Society’s performance, Georgia searches for her frantically and breaks down crying. When Rooney, who was just taking a walk and buying flowers for Georgia, sees her, she asks her what is wrong. Georgia confesses: “I just care about you so much . . . but I’ve always got this fear that . . . one day you’ll leave” (Oseman 412) and that this thought is especially scary because she will never have “that one special person” (Oseman 412). Rooney then asks her if she can be that person: “you know what I realised on my walk? [...] I realise that I *love you*, Georgia [...] Obviously I’m not romantically in love with you. But [...] I feel like I *am* in love. Me and you – *this* is a fucking love story” (Oseman 413). They promise to

spend the rest of their lives together “until [they]’re old ladies, sitting in the same care home” (Oseman 414), proving the “moral fantasy of the romance” that “love [is] triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties” (Cawelti 41-42).

4.4.4. Conclusion

A first way in which *Loveless* subverts the romance, is by cancelling Georgia’s romantic storylines. The novel sets Georgia up with Jason and hints at several alternative alloromantic endings, but shows how these pairings are impossible due to Georgia’s aromantic nature. Georgia is invested in making these romantic relationships succeed, she is scared to live outside of the alloromantic future she has always imagined. The fact that she is actively trying to make the relationships succeed but she still fails further highlights the impossibility to complete an allonormative romance narrative as an aromantic person, revealing the exclusionary nature of the romance. Aside from highlighting its exclusionary nature, having Georgia get her happy ending without a romantic partner proves that Georgia’s lack of romantic attraction –and thus, her identity as an aromantic and asexual person–, which is initially portrayed as the novel’s central problem, is not a problem at all: not being able to complete an alloromantic romance narrative does not prevent Georgia from finding happiness in the end.

The second way in which *Loveless* subverts the romance, however, aims to address this exclusion, by decentering romantic love in the romance and replacing it with platonic love. In this way, *Loveless* queers the romance: it aromanticizes the romance formula, providing a way for people on the aromantic spectrum to still partake in this popular genre, and proving that platonic stories deserve to be told too. Ending with Georgia, Jason, Pip, Sunil and Rooney all moving in together for their next year of college, *Loveless* emphasizes the deep connection and permanency

that one can find in their friendships. It answers the question posed by the novel's blurb if Georgia is "destined to remain loveless?" (Oseman) with a firm no.

Loveless adheres to the typical formula of a romance through its first-person narration by a young woman, through not just having one or two, but three 'climactic declarations of love', through its third-act breakup and the shared conquest of obstacles, and through the open recognition that the protagonists have fallen in love platonically. *Loveless*'s adherence to these romance conventions legitimizes platonic love and challenges the idea that 'true love' can only exist romantically. Platonic love is not inferior to romantic love. It can be just as (narratively) fulfilling as romantic love, or even infinitely more fulfilling in the case of an aromantic person. *Loveless* subverts the romance by nullifying its romantic set-up numerous times and celebrates platonic love through its generic formula instead. This makes a typically alloromantic genre accessible to aromantic queerness and negates the idea that only romantic love is worthy of its own love story.

4.5. Narrative Play in *Loveless*

In this section of my paper, I have examined the different ways in which *Loveless* subverts allonormative conventions and how these subversions decentralize allosexuality and alloromanticism and create narratives that are inclusive of asexual and aromantic identities. I first discussed the novel's rejection of sexual scripts. I explained how the novel initially positions itself as an urgency script through its explicit depiction of Georgia's desperation to have sex and the negative stigma attached to her virginity –both key elements of the urgency script–. I then argued that *Loveless* shows the harmful nature of these scripts by depicting the negative effect that adhering to these narratives has on Georgia's mental health and interpersonal relationships. The novel openly and explicitly condemns the urgency script but also implicitly discredits sexual

scripts as a whole by giving Georgia a happy ending without denying her asexuality and, even more importantly, by emphasizing that Georgia can never be happy if she does adhere to them. *Loveless* thus rejects any scripts that concern sexuality for their inflexibility, instead portraying sexuality as a deeply individual matter.

Secondly, I argued that *Loveless* consistently positions itself as a coming-of-age story, only leaving out the presence of a sexual awakening typically included in such a narrative. In doing so, *Loveless* desexualizes the concepts of ‘maturity’ and ‘adolescence’ and normalizes asexuality by “locating it amidst familiar (traditionally heterosexual) tropes” (Henderson Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 9). The novel is not the first to explore such an asexual conception of the coming-of-age story, however. It joins *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* and *Let’s Talk about Love* in creating what Alex Henderson refers to as “the concept of a uniquely asexual coming-of-age story” (Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 10).

Lastly, I made the two-part argument that *Loveless* highlights how the romance genre typically has no place for aromantic people and that it aromanticizes the romance formula, creating this place for aromanticism itself. The novel highlights the exclusionary nature of the romance by depicting a protagonist that desperately wants to adhere to these narratives, but ultimately fails to do so. It then aromanticizes the romance formula, making the genre inclusive of aromantic identities. It does so through its several platonic third-act breakups and climactic declarations of love and through Rooney and Georgia’s relationship, which perfectly fits readers’ descriptions of the romance formula: they grow together, overcoming several obstacles along the way, and slowly realize their love for each other, resulting in an intense love confession at the end of the novel.

In conclusion, there are several ways in which *Loveless* queers conventions. Whereas the novel depicts the limitations of the urgency script and, in the end, rejects sexual scripts entirely by giving Georgia her asexual happy ending, the novel keeps the coming-of-age genre intact while simply desexualizing its notion of maturity. The romance, too, is simply expanded to fit aromantic narratives, as *Loveless* offers an aromanticized version of the traditional romance. The one thing that these genres and scripts have in common, is that *Loveless* uses their conventions as signposts to position itself within them and then counters their allonormative nature in a metatextual comment on the exclusionary character of these allosexual and alloromantic conventions. In this way, *Loveless* perfectly shows how subversion can be used as a queer strategy to counter hegemonic –in this case allonormative– narratives and to include those communities that are typically marginalized. This might then be the ‘ulterior motive’ of *Loveless*’s genre selection: the inclusion and normalization of asexual and aromantic narratives.

5. The Nuance within Subversion

5.1. Introduction

Loveless subverts the allonormative notions within several genres and conventions to destabilize the hegemonic position of allosexual and alloromantic narratives. While doing so, however, the novel relies on other traditional features. The novel carefully balances its destabilizing subversions with perspectives that are societally favored to make these changes more ‘digestible’. This creates a complex interplay where the novel claims certain privileges and power while destabilizing other dominant perspectives. In this section I will nuance the subversive nature of *Loveless* as a novel by examining the ways in which it adheres to privileged positions and stereotypes. More specifically,

I will discuss Georgia's whiteness and her relative privilege within the queer community and her adherence to the prototypical image of an asexual protagonist.

5.2. Georgia's Relative Privilege

As explored in section 2.2.3., queerness is typically more accepted in white people than in people of color: "[t]he relative privilege of White, middle-class lesbians and gay men appears to have been entrenched" (Brown 1065). This is reflected in queer media, where queer people of color are often sidelined in favor of white queer protagonists. This trend is also true for asexual representation: "white asexual people are very overrepresented at all level": "asexual people of colour are more invisible than white asexual people" (Decker 72, as cited in Kennon 17).

Loveless's queer protagonist, Georgia, being white is thus familiar to the readers: it is in line with their expectations. This minimizes audience estrangement in light of the other subversions going on.

It also further marginalizes asexual and aromantic people of color, however, as is most clearly illustrated through Sunil and Jess, respectively a homoromantic asexual non-binary person with an Indian heritage and a bisexual aromantic black girl. Sunil is the least explored character of the main friend group, who is mainly there for support, whereas Jess rarely appears in the novel at all. The novel reduces their roles to a minimum, side-lining them in favor of the white asexual and aromantic protagonist. The novel does openly acknowledge the predominant whiteness of queer communities as well as the privilege Georgia brings, however. Pip, Latina lesbian and Georgia's best friend, for example, points out that the "Pride Soc is pretty white overall" (Oseman 187). The novel even openly acknowledges Georgia's privileged position, as she only "realizes how correct [Pip] was" (Oseman 187) when this is pointed out to her.

Loveless does not only acknowledge this racial gap, however, the novel also acknowledges the differences in experience that this marginalization of people of color entails. When Georgia finds Sunil's blog, for example, she finds a post where they express the alienation they felt from the predominantly white asexual discourse, as Indian culture has its own unique perspective on sexuality that shaped his experiences: it is only "after finding a group of Indian asexuals online, [that] he'd felt proud of his identity" (Oseman 296). Georgia openly recognizes this difference in experience, stating that Sunil had "no doubt been on a very different journey [...] and a lot of things that he'd dealt with, [Georgia] would be shielded from due to being white and cis" (Oseman 296).

Her whiteness is not the only thing shielding Georgia, however. She is cisgender, comes from a middle-class background, does not have any disabilities, etc.; all things that can give her a relative advantage over other queer individuals. These features serve to make her presence less 'threatening', as she adheres to the hegemonic ideals, and give her a 'pass' to stray outside of the norm.

5.3. Utilizing Asexual Stereotypes

Another way in which *Loveless* makes its story more conventional, is by adhering to the stereotypical image of asexuality that is presented in media. Cisgender adolescent women like Georgia, for example, currently make up the majority of asexual representation within the Young Adult genre (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story* 4), potentially because asexuality is incompatible with the hypersexuality often tied to the notion of masculinity. Men are expected to affirm their manhood by engaging in "'bro talk' and 'sex banter' with other men" (Tessler & Winer 8). Identifying as asexual thus becomes emasculating, contributing to "men's minority status among those on the asexuality spectrum" (Tessler & Winer 9). Women, on the other hand,

“aren't supposed to like sex” (Tessler & Winer 9) in the first place, (misguidedly) making their asexuality more digestible. Georgia, as a woman, is more readily accepted as asexual and has to challenge less stereotypes than an asexual man might.

Another stereotype that Georgia adheres to, is that of the aromantic asexual protagonist. As Henderson remarks: “[i]t is rare to see a character portrayed as romantically interested in someone while explicitly not being sexually attracted to them as well” (Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 7). This tendency to depict asexual people that are also aromantic likely stems from the “prevailing source of confusion regarding asexuality” (Henderson, Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 7): the difference between romantic and sexual attraction. When readers are met asexual characters, they often “automatically [perceive them] as being aromantic as well (Henderson, Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 7). By having asexual characters be aromantic too, writers do not have to explain the difference, nor do they need to show how asexual characters navigate relationships without sex.

Depicting an asexual relationship would entail challenging the notion that “a ‘real’ relationship requires sex and sexual attraction to function” (Henderson, Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 7); a notion that is reflected in the idea that a “romantic plotline requires sex and sexual attraction to function” (Henderson, Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 7). In other words, Georgia being both aromantic and asexual means that *Loveless* has one less pervasive idea to subvert—the notion that romantic storylines are inherently allosexual—and complies with readers’ expectations, making Georgia more palatable to the average reader.

It is important to note that *Loveless* does explicitly make the difference between asexuality and aromanticism; it does not shy away from this distinction. The novel also features a character that is asexual but still experiences romantic attraction—Sunil—. However, there is no love interest

for him, nor is his romantic attraction ever expanded upon. While *Loveless* clarifies the distinction between sexual and romantic attraction, educating readers that are unaware of this difference, it does very little to show the reality and implications of it.

5.4. Conclusion

While *Loveless* is subversive in many ways, it still falls back on privileged perspectives and stereotypical depictions. *Loveless* features a white able-bodied, cisgender, middle-class queer protagonist, giving her a relatively safe position in society, and only briefly acknowledges the privilege within this perspective. Aside from this, the novel adheres to the prominent asexual tropes of the female asexual and the aromantic asexual that make her more palatable to readers. There appears to be a limit to the amount of subversion possible in this novel, as *Loveless* is protected by other traditions to make these subversion.

It is important to note that *Loveless* is but a single novel. It can never represent the whole asexual and aromantic community with its vastly different experiences, nor should we expect it to. It is interesting, however, that this novel in particular, centering an asexual and aromantic protagonist, was able to become so popular. Alice Oseman being well-known within queer media likely played a role, but it might be worth considering these more structural elements of the story contributed to that popularity. As asexual and aromantic representation increase, we will hopefully see many more different, diverse depictions rise to prominence.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined how *Loveless* queers conventions to make them inclusive of asexual and aromantic stories. This strategy of queering –subverting– genres and scripts to challenge hegemonic narratives has long been around, but has yet to be researched extensively in

asexual and aromantic narratives, since asexual and aromantic representation and scholarship are still in their early stages. Although there is this lack of research, there is a lot of value in exploring asexual narratives. Asexuality has such a unique position, even within queer communities, that fictional works “exploring asexuality [...] can pose a challenge to dominant social narratives and ideas about selfhood, love, and maturation” (Henderson, *Asexual Coming-of-Age Story 2*). I have tried to show some of the ways in which *Loveless* challenges these ‘dominant social narratives’ in this essay and hope, in this way, to have contributed in some way to these conversations.

More specifically, I first argued that *Loveless* creates a metafictional awareness that makes its queer narrative play more effective and noticeable. The novel creates this awareness in two steps. Firstly, it highlights the societal allosexual and alloromantic expectations and how they negatively affect several characters. *Loveless* shows how Georgia is virgin-shamed when confessing to never having kissed, for example, leading her to have a negative self-image and to feel alienated from her peers. Even likeable characters such as Rooney, Georgia’s best friend, reinforce these allonormative notions, when they tell her that she will find someone eventually, or that she just has to meet the right person, showing the pervasiveness of these ideologies and making the reader aware of them.

Secondly, *Loveless* emphasizes how these norms are reflected in literature, and how literature, in turn, shapes character’s own expectations. The novel explicitly calls attention to these tropes, commenting, for example, on the absurdity of urgency scripts –media depicting young teenagers that are desperate to lose their virginity–, a script that *Loveless* itself initially follows and eventually rejects. It also shows how characters apply fictional standards to their own lives – Georgia wanting her own love story, for example, and likening her potential relationship with Jason to a friends-to-lover romance– and how this is problematic when the characters force

themselves to adhere to these standards, despite not being able to –most notably Georgia forcing herself to get her own perfect love story despite her not actually feeling romantically attracted to someone–. This emphasis on fictional allonormativity and its consequences, I argued, makes the reader more susceptible to noticing the allonormative conventions used by *Loveless* itself, thus making the novel’s eventual subversions more noticeable.

I then discussed several of these allonormative formulas and how *Loveless* initially fits itself into them, only to subvert, to ‘queer’ them –subversions that can only be as effective as they are through the creation of metafictional awareness as discussed above–. I focused on three allonormative formulas used in this way: the urgency script, the coming-of-age novel and the romance. Before examining how *Loveless* adheres to and ultimately cancels the urgency script, I first explained what an ‘urgency script’ entailed. The urgency script is one third of the ‘sexual scripts’ –ways of portraying virginity-loss– used in teen dramas, as mapped by Maura Kelly. It involves a character desperate for sex because of the negative stigma attached to virginity. I argued that *Loveless* adheres to this narrative, as Georgia herself faces ridicule and infantilization due to her virginity and is eager to be sexually intimate because of it. By using this script with an asexual protagonist, the novel is able to clearly portray the flaws in these scripts: no matter how she tries, Georgia’s attempts at sexual intimacy fail, ruining her self-perception and her relationships. This shows how sexual scripts exclude people like her, for whom sexual intimacy is uncomfortable and sexual desire unobtainable, and how this negatively impacts these characters who are still pressured into participating in these scripts. Ultimately, Georgia is able to find her happy ending only when she lets go of these sexual scripts, negating their validity and challenging the allonormativity within them. This, then, is the first way in which *Loveless* tackles allonormative conventions in fiction and pushes for inclusion of asexual narratives.

The second allonormative formula that *Loveless* subverts, is that of the coming-of-age story. Although the coming-of-age story is a popular genre to explore queer narratives in, it is still a genre with allosexual connotation and expectations, highlighting asexuality's marginalized position even within typically queer spaces. I argue that *Loveless* subverts these allosexual expectations by not giving into them, creating an asexualized coming-of-age story in the process. This, I argue, only works because of *Loveless*'s consistent self-positioning as a coming-of-age novel through its setting, interpersonal shifts and conflicts. The novel maintains the frame of the coming-of-age novel with the only exception being the allosexual connotation to maturity. By exploring asexuality in a genre centered around the tradition into adulthood, *Loveless* normalizes the asexual coming-of-age experience as just another way to enter adulthood, getting rid of the sexual connotation of this adulthood in the process.

The last formula subverted in *Loveless*, is the romance novel. The novel subverts this genre in two ways. Firstly, the novel sets up a traditional romance story between Georgia and Jason, explicitly likening this potential relationship to a friends-to-lovers formula. However, despite how much Georgia wants this love story to happen, she is unable to complete it, as her aromantic identity means she will not fall in love with Jason. Forcing herself to fit these alloromantic formulas only makes her miserable, highlighting how the romance is inaccessible to aromantic individuals like her. Secondly, *Loveless* subverts the romance formula by aromanticizing it. It aromanticizes these formulas by adhering to them in a platonic way: the novel uses the romance convention of the first-person young, female narrator and, in accordance with the romance, explores the growing love between her and her friends, ending with dramatic love confessions after going through several obstacles together and briefly breaking up. Centering these romantic

formulas on platonic love makes the genre accessible to aromantic people and proves that they have just as much love in their lives that is worth exploring in fiction.

Loveless thus subverts several allonormative formulas, either rejecting them entirely or adjusting them to fit aromantic and asexual narratives. If genre selection can “reveal ulterior, if not downright hostile, motives” (Pugh 117-118), then *Loveless*’s continuous selection and subversion of allosexual and alloromantic genres might say something about the novel’s intent to challenge hegemonic allonormative narratives in favor of including more marginalized aromantic and asexual voices.

I then nuanced the extent of subversion in the novel, exploring how these subversive narratives are intertwined with other privileging factors and stereotypical depictions. More specifically, I explored how Georgia being white, able-bodied, cisgender and of middle-class background, gives her a relative privilege to stray outside the allosexual and alloromantic norm. Then, I displayed the stereotypes that *Loveless* does adhere to, showing that even in its subversions, the novel still benefits from its prototypical protagonist.

In exploring these topics, I hope to have brought attention to the many strategies employed by *Loveless* to queer allonormative conventions –i.e. subverting and adapting genres; creating metafictional awareness to make these subversions more effective–, as well as to the role that its relatively privileged and stereotypical protagonist might have played in the novel’s success. I hope that I showed how novels sometimes strategically adhere to certain hegemonic standards to challenge other dominant positions. It would be interesting to see further research on the strategies employed to center marginalized communities and to explore more in-depth the role of whiteness, middle-class background and other relatively privileging factors in prominent asexual media.

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