DEMISEXUALITY IN ALI HAZELWOOD'S STEMINIST SERIES: *THE LOVE HYPOTHESIS* (2021) AND *LOVE, THEORETICALLY* (2023)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of demisexuality in Ali Hazelwood's *STEMinist series*, particularly in *The Love Hypothesis* (2021) and *Love, Theoretically* (2023). The main focus of the analysis is on how these two novels' demisexual protagonists navigate self-discovery, romantic relationships to determine whether there is a subversion genre expectations in contemporary romance. While demisexuality remains an underrepresented identity in literature, Hazelwood's works offer valuable insight into the challenges demisexual people face, including negotiating their emotional and sexual boundaries. The analysis explores how Hazelwood's protagonists—Olive Smith and Elsie Hannaway—embody different aspects of the asexual spectrum, particularly in their conditional approach to sexual attraction and emotional bonding. The paper first addresses Olive Smith in *The Love Hypothesis*, highlighting how her emotional connection with her romantic partner gradually evolves into sexual attraction, aligning with the demisexual experience. Olive's journey illustrates her internal struggle between social expectations of romantic and sexual relationships and her personal pace of developing attraction. The analysis then shifts to Elsie Hannaway in *Love, Theoretically*, focusing on themes of unwilling consent, compulsory sexuality, and the tension between social norms and demisexuality. Elsie's complex relationship with intimacy and her orientation reflects broader issues of erotonormativity and challenges the traditional narrative of physical desire in romance. The conclusion synthesizes these findings, questioning whether Hazelwood's portrayal effectively normalizes demisexuality or whether it is constrained by the romance genre's conventions, particularly regarding erotonormativity. Ultimately, this study contributes to discussions on asexual representation in popular fiction and the evolving depiction of lesser-known identities within mainstream genres.

Keywords: demisexuality; asexuality; queer literature; contemporary romance; asexual spectrum.

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1. DEMISEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

According to the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), a major online resource and forum for the 'ace' community, an asexual individual is a person "who does not experience sexual attraction or an intrinsic desire to have sexual relationships" (2024). Currently, this definition is perhaps the most accepted one, as it leaves room for 'gray areas', unlike Anthony F. Bogaert's, who defines asexuality as "a complete lack of sexual attraction and/or sexual desire" (2012, 5), thus failing to acknowledge the

experience of people whose sexual attraction might be conditional. Unlike other sexual orientations, the focus of attraction for a demisexual person lies on the conditions under which it occurs, rather than the frequency or intensity of sexual desire, being therefore neither absent nor constant. Whereas people have identified as asexual for decades—even bonding over this spectrum in the 1970s in self-published works and zines such as *Lavender Woman*, or the *riot grrrl* zines in the 1990s (Kliegman 2019, n.p.)—the term 'demisexual' was first coined in 2006 by AVEN. The concept of demisexuality, however, had already been gaining visibility in online communities in the early 2000s, particularly through social media, as people felt identified with a label that helped them define their experiences outside more well-known sexual orientations. As LGBTQIA+ movements gained visibility in the 2010s, terms like 'demisexuality' were included in discussions about 'allosexuality', 'asexuality' and 'graysexuality'. Over the past decade, demisexuality has gained increasing recognition in both media and academic discussions, and nowadays, demisexuality is considered part of the range of identities within the asexual spectrum[1], and it is defined as a person "who can only experience sexual attraction or desire after an emotional bond has been formed . . . [which] is different from the choice to abstain from sex until certain criteria are met" (AVEN 2024). In other words, demisexuality refers to a specific orientation within the asexual spectrum.

However, like many nuanced sexual identities, its understanding and acceptance tends to vary. Many demisexuals still have to explain what this orientation is and defend its validity, on top of dealing with confusions and misconceptions, such as the idea that demisexuality is 'normal' because everyone desires emotional connection before intimacy: for demisexuals, emotional connection is a necessary condition for sexual attraction, not a preference. In a study carried out by Hille et al., the number of people who claimed that an emotional connection was extremely important to them was a vast majority in the pool of participants who identified as demisexual (69.3%), and significantly low in that of self-identified asexual people (29.6%) (2020, 821). Even though demisexuality is recognized as part of the asexual spectrum, the challenges it poses to conventional ideas about sexual attraction and relationships usually generates resistance and prejudice. Therefore, its visibility has been and is extremely important for those who identify this way.

In literature, the representation of demisexuality is still evolving: although there are no comprehensive studies of explicitly demisexual characters yet, it is possible to highlight a few authors who have explored the concept in the last decade. Particularly,

[1] Even though nowadays the label 'asexual' defines an orientation, the term 'asexual spectrum' encompasses the different orientations of people who experience little to no sexual attraction. This spectrum is defined by opposition to the 'allosexual spectrum', which includes orientations such as straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and so on.

the young adult (YA) genre has been key in the exploration of diverse sexual identities, including demisexuality, since such works often focus on characters coming to terms with their identities. Amanda K. Allen provides an insightful overview of the studies on the YA genre from the 1980s to the present, arguing that contemporary YA literature is witnessing a proliferation of romance plots that contest the primacy of heterosexual and cis-gendered couples, and that the scholarship of these works tends to favour these publications as "helpful" to the LGBTQIA+ community (2020, 182–3). However, whereas there have been several studies on queer literature, Allen argues that the platform or medium which represents a wider variety of gender identities, expressions, and sexual orientations is fanfiction (2020, 183) as they do not stick to marketing strategies and can be as explicit as their author wishes. This connects with Allen's problematization of the label 'Young-Adult', which even nowadays carries a connotation of what is appropriate material for teenagers, and her consideration of the label 'New Adult' for romance novels which include issues connected with sexual exploration and sexual intercourse (2020, 185).

One of the most well-known YA novels that features a protagonist in the asexual spectrum is Alice Oseman's *Loveless* (2020), a coming-of-age story in which Georgia, the protagonist, comes to terms with the fact that she does not feel sexual and romantic attraction to other people. Other noteworthy examples are Kathryn Ormsbee's *Tash Hearts Tolstoy* (2017), whose main character , Natasha, is an 'Internet-famous' romantic asexual who struggles to communicate her orientation to a potential partner, and Claire Kann's *Let's Talk About Love* (2018), in which Alice, a black biromantic asexual girl, has to navigate the disappointment of being broken-up with because of her orientation and the fear of being accepted as asexual by a new love interest. Beyond the conventions of either YA or 'New Adult' literature, the inclusion of an asexual character seems to entail at least a subplot concerning a search of identity and a fear of rejection, and the speculative fiction genres are fertile ground for such themes since they delve into exploring the nature of social norms and identities. In *The Raven Cycle* series (2012-2018) by Maggie Stiefvater, Ronan Lynch is not explicitly labeled as demisexual, but fans of the series have interpreted him as demisexual based on his lack of interest in physical attraction and his deep emotional connection with another character, Adam Parrish. Kameron Hurley's *The Stars Are Legion* (2017) presents a world in which asexual reproduction is possible, and thus sex is a purely recreational activity or completely unnecessary. Finally, in romance novels, where physical and romantic attraction are essential for the development of the plot, asexual characters bring a refreshing set of possibilities on the nature and shape of romantic relationships. The protagonist in *Perfect Rhythm* (2017) by Jae, Holly, is an asexual woman hesitant to embrace intimacy who falls in love with a pop star nonetheless, and the novel emphasizes how physical desire and romantic interest are completely different matters.

Literature featuring demisexual characters often highlights themes of emotional connection, the nuance of attraction, and the complexity of relationships, normalizing and bringing visibility to this lesser-known identity. And yet, the most significant source of asexual visibility in fiction is not the editorial market. Online platforms like *Archive of Our Own* (*AO3*) and *Wattpad* host a large sum of fanfiction works featuring explicitly demisexual characters and their particular, realistic concerns. As Cerankowski states, "[t]he wider community in this era of new media does not simply decentralize a political movement, but reveals its diversities, its possibilities, and its willful and productive obscurities" (2014, 140). A quick search on *AO3* reveals how popular stories representing asexuality are: under the tag of 'asexual character', 36,902 works are listed, and the number is even larger for those tagged with the label 'asexuality', which amount up to 42,839 at the moment of writing these lines. These figures, of course, would pale in comparison to the ones indicating the amount of users who have read each of these works, which entails that there is an avid readership of characters who express asexual traits. Fanfiction authors explicitly name, label and explore asexuality in ways that traditional publishers have not yet embraced. Therefore, it does not seem illogical that Ali Hazelwood's debut novel, *The Love Hypothesis* (2021), stems from a *Star Wars, Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) fanfiction piece that the author originally posted on *AO3*. This work, which features a demisexual protagonist, paved the way for a series of works by Hazelwood that shares themes, plot structure, and demisexual representation. *The Love Hypothesis* soon became a *New York Times* bestseller, earning positive reviews from *Entertainment Weekly* and *Publishers Weekly*, as well as being nominated for 'Best Romance' in the Goodreads Choice Awards. The novel sold around 750,000 copies worldwide, and a film adaptation was announced to be in the works in 2022.

Ali Hazelwood's *STEMinist* series focuses on romances featuring women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. These novels and novellas blend humor, a passion for science, the struggle of making a living in academia, and romantic relationships, highlighting the challenges and triumphs of young women navigating their early careers and personal lives. In *The Love Hypothesis*, Olive Smith is a biology PhD candidate who fakes a relationship with a young professor, Adam Carlsen, to convince her best friend that she's moved on from a previous crush, only to later realize that her feelings for him may not be as fake as she thought. The second novel in the series, *Love on the Brain* (2022) introduces Bee Königswasser, a neuroscientist who is forced to collaborate with her nemesis, Levi Ward, on a NASA project. Similarly, *Love, Theoretically* (2023), the third title, tells the story of Elsie Hannaway, a theoretical physicist who despises Jack Smith-Turner, an experimental physicist, until their interactions blossom into a romance. A collection of three novellas ("Under One Roof," "Stuck with You," and "Below Zero") titled *Loathe to Love You* (2023) follows three female scientists—Mara, Sadie, and Hannah—who also work in different STEM fields and navigate complicated

romantic situations with men they initially clash with but eventually fall for. In general, all the works in the series explore the challenges of young women who are trying to make a place for themselves in male-dominated fields, and as a consequence, they must deal with different forms of sexism at the workplace. Combining light-hearted romance with themes of gender dynamics in STEM, and featuring relatable characters, witty dialogue, and strong female protagonists, Hazelwood's novels have become bestsellers. And yet, despite their popularity, the fact that most of their protagonists are demisexual is seldom mentioned.

Therefore, this article seeks to examine how the main characters in Hazelwood's works portray different aspects of the asexual spectrum with a clear emphasis on demisexuality in order to explore how they subvert expectations for the contemporary romance genre and, in a broader sense, how demisexuality challenges the traditional notions of physical desire and romantic relationships. The first section focuses on *The Love Hypothesis* and the conventions of the contemporary romance genre, analyzing Olive's emotional bonding to her romantic interest, her process of self-discovery, and her decision to either communicate her orientation or keep that to herself. The second section follows this up with an analysis of *Love, Theoretically* with a specific focus on the concepts of unwilling consent, compulsory sexuality, and amatonormativity. Finally, the conclusion brings all these points together to argue whether these works provide an effective general picture of demisexuality or whether demisexuality is an excuse to preserve genre conventions and erotonormativity.

2. Finding 'The One': Demisexuality and Romance

The plot of *The Love Hypothesis* (*TLH*) by Ali Hazelwood is decidedly that of a contemporary romance novel, as it follows Olive Smith, a third-year PhD candidate at Stanford University, who impulsively kisses Adam Carlsen, a young and intimidating professor, in order to convince her best friend that she has moved on from her ex so that she can date him guilt-free. Even though Adam is known for his brusque demeanor and anti-social preferences, he agrees to a fake-dating ruse with Olive, since it can help him with his academic funding situation. As the fake relationship continues, Olive and Adam develop a routine of spending time together in public, which leads to Olive seeing a more supportive, kind, and thoughtful side of him. Therefore, while Olive plans to remain emotionally detached, small moments of vulnerability, witty banter, and undeniable chemistry lead her to rethink her considerations of Adam, especially as she realizes that he has feelings for her as well. Since Olive does not have too much experience with relationships, at first she is hesitant to acknowledge her own feelings, and then she has trouble understanding Adam's romantic advances for what they are. However, once she comes to terms with her attraction towards him, their relationship moves forward as they become physically intimate. After solving a conflict involving a senior male professor who

tries to take advantage of her vulnerability, Olive faces her fear of rejection and confesses her romantic feelings for Adam. For these reasons, *TLH* stands as a heartwarming and witty romance in which Hazelwood brings together female empowerment, the particular struggles of women in STEM, and the challenges of juniors in academia.

Apart from its evident romantic content, the marketing strategy for *TLH* has been focused on the novel's key tropes to present it as such, targeting young female audiences, and creating social media buzz fit to its strategic branding on platforms such as 'BookTok' and 'Bookstagram'—*TikTok*'s and *Instagram*'s book communities, respectively. By sharing video reviews, text posts, photos, snippets, and different types of edited images about the book, users have generated content which served as word-of-mouth marketing focused on the witty dialogue banter, the chemistry between the characters, and the novel's swoon-worthy moments, which led to a rapid sales growth. Consequently, *TLH* has mostly capitalized on tropes such as 'fake dating', 'grumpy/sunshine' dynamics, and 'slow-burn romance', all of which are highly popular in online readership due to the humorous and heartwarming situations they entail, but also because of the fact that they are extremely popular fanfiction tags that readers are already familiarized with. Moreover, the 'STEMinist' subgenre, featuring strong, relatable female protagonists has provided a fresh take in a genre where the contemporary concerns of young women are put on the spotlight, generating a sense of identity and a strong feeling of community. The STEM element adds intellectual depth and attracts a niche audience—namely, women in academia and/or STEM fields—who have been traditionally underappreciated or underrepresented in romance fiction. By focusing on Olive's experiences as a woman in science, the marketing strategy for *TLH* appeals to readers interested in feminist narratives that emphasize gender equality and empowerment. Finally, the illustrated cover of *TLH*—showing a realistic yet simplified, comics depiction of Olive and Adam kissing—fits the aesthetic that dominates the contemporary romance genre today. In correspondence with the lighthearted plot, this artistic style attracts a readership drawn to modern romance while announcing very explicitly the sort of story that this is.

Despite its huge sales success and online popularity, there are little to no instances of this novel being referred to as 'queer literature', and certainly, the fact that Olive is a demisexual woman is almost never mentioned or acknowledged.[2] As opposed to more classic female protagonists who initially swear off from falling in love ever again due to heartbreak and disappointments, Olive's initial hypothesis—"the farther away I stay from

[2] For practical purposes, it is necessary to clarify that this article employs the term 'queer' to refer to gender identities and sexual orientations that are not 'straight' and 'cis-gender'. As the article problematizes, many readers may not fully interpret Olive and/or Elsie as queer heroines, given that they are cis women and their romantic interests are cis men. However, Hazelwood explicitly describes them as demisexual and their exploration of their attraction is key to the novels' plots. Therefore, I understand them as queer characters who are the protagonists of queer novels.

love, the better off I will be" (Hazelwood 2021, n.p.)—stems from honest disinterest and a lack of understanding of the social dynamics connected with flirting, dating, and sexual attraction. For instance, since Olive does not experience immediate physical attraction to Adam, she expresses her incredulity towards the idea that someone could find a teacher-student affair an interesting piece of gossip (41). The five dates that Olive has been to in her life "ranged from moderately boring to anxiety inducing to horrifying," and her negative experiences have left her wondering "What do people who are dating do?" and whether she is "unlovable" even though she "would have loved to have someone in her life" (47-8). For this reason, her initial reasons for kissing Adam are purely practical, and she faces her fake relationship as a research project with a clear plan of action and a strict set of rules, which explicitly state that Olive and Adam shall not have sex (55), and that there will be no dates with other people (57). The fact that Olive has to will herself to even say the words "no sex" (55) proves her discomfort with physical interactions, and she even reflects that "if for some inexplicable reason Adam wanted to have sex with her, she wasn't going to be able to go through with it" (56). Certainly, Olive is not only dumbfounded by the idea that Adam would find her sexually attractive—as she has not come to terms with the implications of such a feeling herself—but she also avoids situations in which she may be perceived in such a way, arguing that "there's better things to use [her] time for" in a rather defensive tone (57).

Despite the fact that these traits fit the experiences of most asexuals, who are not at all motivated by sexual attraction, particularly in the selection of a partner (Decker 2014, n.p.), Olive eventually feels sexually attracted to Adam. However, this takes place after a complex process of emotional bonding and self-discovery. At first, even Olive's understanding of 'love' does not seem to fully grasp a distinction between romantic bonds and other meaningful connections, since she describes becoming friends with Anh, her best friend, as "love at first sight" (Hazelwood 2021, 24). The fact that Olive feels that she is "alone in the world" (24) does not pair with a nostalgia for a romantic partner so much as the general loneliness of a person who does not have a meaningful connection with friends or family, and she wonders whether "spending so many years alone had warped her in some fundamental way and that [is] why she [is] unable to develop a true romantic connection, or even the type of attraction she often [hears] others talk about" (47-8). Although common, this hypothetical pathologization of asexuality in any of its forms has been discarded, as "[b]ad experiences do not make people stop being sexually attracted to others, nor does 'giving up' on finding a partner" (Decker 2014, n.p.). After Olive has spent a good amount of time and formed an emotional connection with Adam, she begins to feel attracted to him due to her new appreciation of his character, his kindness, and how he supports her in her academic struggles. Once Olive becomes familiar with "his expressions, his size, his distinctive way of being in the same space as her" (Hazelwood 2021, 106), she opens the door to physical desire. Although she has found Adam

handsome from the beginning, noticing, for instance, that "his clothes fit him well" (69), or that a new haircut makes him look better than usual (79), these initial realizations sank into her as something strange and unsettling, mostly due to the lack of an emotional bond. Even as they share a first kiss, Olive describes sexual arousal as something which is "not unpleasant, but confusing and a bit scary nonetheless" (109).

Even though "for years [Olive had] wondered whether she was asexual and she had realized only recently that she might be able to experience sexual attraction, but only with people she trusted deeply" (56), a systemic part of the plot is connected with her process of self-discovery as a demisexual woman, even if she does never explicitly label herself in such a way. In *The Invisible Orientation* (2014), Julie Sondra Decker includes several bullet point list meant to help questioning people which delve into experiences concerning or close to identity, relationships, sex and physical contact in general, but ultimately emphasizes that "as enlightening as finding a label can be, it isn't absolutely necessary" (n.p.). Olive spends much of the book reflecting on her lack of understanding on how physical attraction seems to come easily to others, and she finds difficulty in processing such attraction when it comes to herself:

> For a long time she'd thought Adam handsome and attractive. She'd touched him, sat on his lap, considered the vague possibility of being intimate with him. She'd thought about him, about sex, about him and sex, but it had always been abstract. Hazy and undefined. Like line art in black and white: just the base for a drawing that was suddenly coloring on the inside. (Hazelwood 2021, 258)

In fact, Olive is embarrassed by the amount of time it takes her to realize that what she is feeling is sexual attraction (Hazelwood 2021, 259), which contributes to a self-deprecating idea of herself in which she perceives herself as "weird," "wrong" and abnormal (267-8). Olive's self-discovery as a demisexual person is intrinsically tangled with the progression of the plot, as she pieces together her romantic feelings, her first sexual fantasies, and Adam's advances and intentions (268), a conflict that is finally solved when she realizes that physical intimacy in any of its form should disgust her, and yet it does not (280).

As it is the case in many queer narratives, the 'coming-out' scene is directly connected with the climax of the narrative, and in spite of the fact that Olive does not use the term 'demisexual' as a label, she perfectly describes her orientation as such. As she explains to Adam, it is not that she wants to not have sex: she just does not particularly want to have it: "I don't feel any sexual attraction unless I actually get to trust and like a person, which for some reason never happens. Or, almost never. It hadn't, not in a long time, but now—I really like you, and I really trust you, and for the first time in a million years I want to" (267–68). This resonates with the thoughts which are common to other

people within the asexual community, such as Angela Chen,[3] who defines herself as asexual due to the fact that she never thinks about sex involuntarily and could be easily celibate, among other traits (2020, n.p.).

Still, whereas this scene serves to lay the foundations of a respectful relationship between Olive and Adam, she does not come out to her friends, who confess to be happy that she is "finally getting laid" (Hazelwood 2021, 136). Even though there is some ambiguity as to whether her friends know whether Olive is in the asexual spectrum or they think she is merely introverted, there is a clear equation of being sexually active and having a sense of fulfillment. This is why one of the most common struggles for asexual people is dealing with the pressure of having sex even if they do not want to, "because they're told over and over again that something worthwhile and fulfilling and beautiful is waiting in coitus, and they're told they 'just can't know' until they do it" (Decker 2014, n.p.). However, even though academics and members of the asexual community have been making efforts to dismantle this myth, it does seem to work out for Olive, as the climatic sex scene of this contemporary romance rewrites all of her negative considerations and changes her indifference towards sex.

According to Jodi McAlister (2014), "the sex scene in the modern romance is often crucial to driving the plot, and can often serve as a microcosmic representation of the hero and heroine's relationship, highlighting the problems that are preventing them from immediately attaining their happy ending" (301). On the one hand, Olive's sexual orientation challenges the idea that the heroine of a romance novel must be irresistibly attracted to the romantic interest, allowing for a deeper exploration of what it means to connect with someone, but on the other, it pays equal importance to sexual intercourse as a decisive ritual and a turning point in a woman's life as other contemporary romance novels do. However, as opposed to these other works, the subject of Olive's attraction is explicitly defined as Adam, which prevents her as a heroine from falling into clichéd misunderstandings and dilemmas that stem from an indecision of choosing the right person. For instance, she observes that Tom, a fellow scientist and Adam's best friend is "clearly fit," with "abs that were defined enough to be easily counted. And yet, for some reason, it did absolutely nothing for Olive" (Hazelwood 2021, 133).

Olive's journey of self-discovery offers a nuanced representation of demisexuality, as her experiences challenge conventional romantic and sexual dynamics, present the importance of emotional connection and trust, but also conclude in a genre-adequate

[3] Angela Chen is investigative journalist who has published essays in The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Guardian, National Geographic, and more. Her book *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals About Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (2020) began to be developed while she was working as a science reporter at The Verge, and it includes interviews with linguists, psychologists and biologists, as well as testimonials of people who identify as 'ace' (meaning, 'asexual').

resolution. The fact that Olive does not label herself as demisexual but still expresses the key features of this identity in her 'coming-out scene' reflects how her experiences diverge from normative understandings of attraction and relationships. This is further demonstrated in several studies, such as Castañon de Carvalho's, which concludes that self-identified demisexuals prioritize the experiences connected with love, intensity, truthfulness, conservatism, mental connection, or non-monogamy, while other aspects more traditionally tied to sexuality remain in the background, such as preferred gender (2021, 46).[4] Despite Olive's eventual sexual attraction to Adam, her discomfort with social expectations surrounding sex and romance is problematized throughout the novel, thus highlighting the pressure of conforming to heteronormative scripts of fulfillment through sexual activity that asexuals feel.

3. Keeping Up Appearances: Demisexuality and Social Acceptance

Following the genre, themes and tropes of *TLH*, *Love, Theoretically* (*LT*) by Ali Hazelwood is a contemporary romance that centers on Elsie Hannaway, a theoretical physicist who wishes to be a full-time researcher but works as an adjunct professor and barely manages to make ends meet. Because of her low income, Elsie works as a fake girlfriend, pretending to be the perfect partner for clients in need of a companion at events or family gatherings. Even though she has to deal with complicated clients every once in a while, she has developed the habit of adjusting her personality to the needs of the people around her, which proves extremely useful at a job which involves systematically lying about one's life and background. One of such fake dating jobs involves helping Greg, an asexual man in his twenties who is constantly assailed by his family due to the reasons why he is single, and consequently, he is reluctant to come-out to them. Elsie's fake identity then crumbles when she meets Gregs's brother, Jack Smith-Turner, who not only somewhat sees through her ruse but also turns out to be one of the members of the interviewing committee for Elsie's dream job as a researcher in MIT. Since Jack is a renowned experimental physicist with a reputation for being particularly skeptical of theorists, he acts cold, dismissive, and distrusting of Elsie. Despite the initial tension, Elsie eventually sees a different side of Jack—one that is kind, deeply intelligent, and passionate about physics. As a romantic connection develops, they work through their differences, mostly those connected with Elsie's compulsive lying, her maladaptive need to constantly please other people, and the rift between their professional fields in academia.

[4] In her Master's thesis, Joana Castañon de Carvalho analyses the role of discourse in the construction of a demisexual identity by interviewing nine Brazilian women who identify as demisexual. Castañon de Carvalho explores the role that gender and sexual attraction play on the lived experience of demisexuality, highlighting how these individuals seek to depart from heteronormativity and the particular impositions they face by being women.

Similarly to *TLH*, *LT* features all the genre elements of a contemporary romance, reinforced by the happy ending in which the two protagonists have found a way to establish a romantic bond. Besides this, the marketing strategy for *LT* followed the successful steps of Hazelwood's previous novels, focusing mostly on familiar romance tropes connected with fanfiction tags—such as the 'enemies-to-lovers' dynamic or 'workplace rivalry'—, the *STEMinist series* label, and the strategic use of social media and influencer support. The 'slow-burn' romance and the intellectual tension between Elsie and Jack provide chemistry-filled interactions and satisfying resolutions to fans of the genre, but perhaps most importantly, *LT*'s marketing as part of the *STEMinist* series not only attracted readers who were already fans of her previous books, but also drew in a new audience interested in feminist romances and the representation of women in science. By focusing on the challenges of women in academia, particularly those in STEM or in precarious positions, the book offers a relatable perspective on career and romantic struggles that resonates with readers. Hazelwood's brand continuity as a contemporary romance author, highlighted by the cohesive illustrated covers with bright colors and clear-line drawings, remains familiar and fresh by presenting new motifs, themes, and scientific fields and disciplines, which has kept her established readership excited while 'BookTok' and 'Bookstagram' also create anticipation and excitement for her books.

The fact that Elsie Hannaway is demisexual, however, is never part of the marketing strategy either, and a vast majority of the social media buzz also seems to look over this essential detail in the book. Not only does Elsie reflect on her orientation in very clear terms—even clearer than Olive in *TLH*—but many aspects of her character and her journey echo the experiences of people in the asexual spectrum. For instance, she thinks to herself how she is still trying to figure herself out within the spectrum (Hazelwood 2023, 149), how she is so unfamiliar with sexual arousal that she struggles to recognize it when she feels it (147), and even jokes that since sex does nothing for her, maybe her kink is being complimented by leading scholars in her field (36). Elsie's attraction for Jack does develop over time, once she has overcome her strong negative impressions of him and their professional relationship has finished. Even though Jack is a conventionally attractive person, Elsie does not immediately want or need any sort of physical connection: it is through their conversations, mutual respect for each other's passions, and emotional vulnerability that Elsie finally wishes to kiss or have sex with Jack. However, she does not come to terms with this fact after a process of self-discovery, which goes from wondering why Jack "brings out the blushing adolescent in [her]" (150) whenever sex is mentioned, to the literal confession "I think I may be attracted to you" (274).

Beyond Elsie's inability to initially understand sexual attraction because of her orientation, she also fails to contemplate that other people might find her sexually attractive. On the one hand, this stems from her insecurities, rooted in her obsession with projecting perfection at all times: Elsie's concept of the perfect girlfriend, daughter, sister

and friend does not allow for awkward situations or mistakes. For instance, she is hesitant to share a bed with Jack not because of the proximity, but because she cannot control what she does at night: "what if I move too much or snore or take up too much space? A cover hog is the Elsie no one wants" (2023, 195). However, not engaging in sexual activity also clashes with the traditional dynamics of romantic relationships, which is why her past romantic experiences were mostly focused on being the person her partner wanted her to be, and her engagement in sexual activities was completely void of personal enjoyment or interest. Much as an actress stepping into a role, Elsie 'performs' romance: she has had sex with her previous boyfriend because that is 'what a girlfriend is supposed to do.'

These interactions fit Nagoski's concept of 'unwilling consent', which is configured by fearing the consequences of saying 'no', thinking that saying 'no' will only lead to insistence, feeling an absence of desire and an absence of desire for desire, and the hope that saying 'yes' means not being bothered anymore (in Chen 2020, n.p.). Furthermore, in a study carried out by Houts in 2005, 28% of women said their first sexual experience was consensual but not exactly wanted (1092), a situation akin to Elsie's experiences. Elsie justifies her participation in a coercive relationship through her need to make other people like her, a desire which Chen (2020) also reflects on when she states that "[sex] gave [her] the feeling [she] had always wanted: not sexual pleasure, but the thrill of specialness" (n.p.). As Elsie explains to Jack, "Mostly, I wanted him to have a version of me he could enjoy" (2023, 248). For Elsie, having sex with a boyfriend is similar to a business transaction or a contract clause, as the idea of attachment by means of physical connections completely escapes her at first.

Therefore, conflict rises between the protagonists in connection with consent. When Jack pushes Elsie to tell him what she enjoys in terms of sex, she is at a loss for words—not because of her lack of experience, but because she has never reflected on what she enjoys. As "[p]eople who have never felt sexual attraction do not know what sexual attraction feels like, and knowing whether or not they have ever felt it can be difficult" (Hinderliter 2009, 620), Jack is rightfully worried about securing his partner's "enthusiastic consent," meaning that Elsie wants him, feels desire, and does not fear any sort of consequences (Chen 2020, n.p.). In a similar way to *TLH*, the sex scene in *LT* allows the female protagonist to realize the wonders of sexual intercourse with the right person, and even though she is neither a virgin nor scared about the physicality of sex, her orientation as a demisexual woman enables her to start a romantic relationship in which her attitude towards sex is never problematized again. As a woman who had never paid any mind to starting either casual or long-term relationships, the resolution of Elsie's character development steers away from asexuality-adjacent issues and focuses more on her fear of rejection. For instance, when her best friend, Cece, makes jokes about how infrequently Elsie has sex, she never confronts her about being unknowingly

inappropriate or hurtful, and the social tendency to pity or mock people who are not in romantic relationships thus prevails (Chen 2020, n.p.). In fact, Elsie does not really come out to anybody, and her identity as a demisexual woman is interwoven in her character development as a people-pleaser in recovery.

In this sense, *LT* can be read as a contemporary romance which highlights the experience of a young woman regardless of her sexual orientation insofar as she is attracted to a man. According to Hannah McCann and Catherine Roach, "[t]he sex-positive, feminist claim for representations of sex in romance is rooted in the fact that the genre is one of the few spaces in the culture that embraces the idea of women's authentic sexual pleasure and that delights in the depiction of female orgasm" (2020, 418), and certainly, the fact that Elsie eventually becomes able to enjoy sex is a key plot point, which she is only able to do because her lover is interested in exploring her sexual needs (2020, 419). Nevertheless, in Jack and Elsie's relationship consent is a major issue, and the discussion of intimacy boundaries is a key scene in this novel—as well as in *TLH*—, which is not often the case in allosexual romance fiction. As Ellen Carter (2020) explains, in ace-spectrum romance fiction, checking in and seeking a lover's explicit consent "becomes a conscious process where both parties check in with each other about how things are moving and adapt to their situation the attitudes and assumptions inculcated from allosexual norms. As a result, relationships are crafted to the specific needs of these individuals rather than borrowed from societal expectations" (13).

Perhaps more explicitly, Greg's subplot is built on the struggles with coming out to family and friends: the reason why he hires Elsie as a fake girlfriend at the beginning of the story is to avoid annoying questions on his lack of partners at family gatherings, and he eventually explains everything to his brother, Jack, which allows the latter to finally act on his feelings for her. As Greg is only featured in a few scenes in the novel, it is not possible to fully know the repercussions of his coming out with the rest of the family or how he engages with members of the queer community. However, it is possible to guess that Greg has struggled with coming out in general as "[i]n many cases, lack of sexual attraction is a problem regardless of whom that attraction might have been directed toward" (Chen 2020, n.p.), since compulsory sexuality is a problematic issue even within queer groups. In fact, Greg's first attempt to come out to Jack was dismissed: "He took me aside and said that he . . . couldn't imagine ever wanting to be in a romantic relationship. And I told him he shouldn't worry. That it was still early and he'd find someone. That it was normal to be nervous before becoming sexually active. That he should just keep an open mind" (Hazelwood 2023, 149). Since Greg is a secondary character, the resolution to his particular conflict takes place in the background, and eventually Jack reports the conversation that he had with his brother, how he apologized for not listening to him before, and assured him of his support from that moment on. The final step in this subplot is connected with the way Greg overcomes his family's queries, and instead of coming out

and explaining his orientation to them, he seems to merely tell them to leave him alone (380). Ultimately, while Elsie starts a romantic relationship with Jack, Greg remains single, which corresponds with the results found by Copulsky and Hammack: "asexual individuals were least likely and demisexual individuals most likely to currently be in a relationship" (2021, 227).

As it seems thus far, demisexuality—and asexuality—are ironically invisibilized in these novels despite being a core source of the protagonists' struggles and being mentioned as orientations in connection with Greg. In the case of Elsie, her chameleonic habits have even led her to speak and joke about sex with the standard normalcy of her society, invisibilizing her own orientation in an attempt to fit in. She establishes parallels between things that bring her joy and sexual terms as if she had a similar amount of experience to her peers, daydreaming about Jack face-planting on the floor as better than sex (Hazelwood 2023, 54), or having an orgasm after a colleague pointed out in public that his experiments were not producing good results (124). This is perhaps why Jack's initial confessions do not shy away from communicating that he finds Elsie sexually attractive (158), that he has fantasized about her (195), and that he has feelings for her (189). Something that Chen (2020) highlights in connection with amatonormativity is how it is woven in society, including legal rights (n.p.). This is precisely why Jack's love confession includes the idea that he wants to eventually marry Elsie just so that she can have access to his health insurance. "Romantic love within marriage confers privileges that other forms of devotion cannot . . . Spouses can share each other's health insurance, as well as military, social security, and disability benefits. They can make medical decisions for each other" (138).

For all the reasons mentioned above, *LT* addresses the complexities of self-defining one's identity and setting healthy boundaries in romantic relationships in connection with demisexuality. Elsie's relationship with Jack serves as a field to explore the tension between social expectations of romance and physical intimacy and the way people in the asexual spectrum experience them. In this sense, there is further evidence of how deeply rooted and widespread erotonormativity leads to asexual erasure: as the experience of sexual attraction is positioned as normative and expected, it captures "not only sexual energy but that more general energy engaged in constructive activity tending toward unity and synthesis: the kind of energy we see at work in narrative sense-making, for instance" (Hanson 2014, 345). Therefore, Elsie's peers might perceive her and her relationship with Jack as heteronormative, and consequently, their worries about her well-being are eased due to the social conception that romance brings fulfillment—an idea perpetuated by romance fiction.

4. Conclusions: Compulsory Demisexuality

In general, Hazelwood's novels provide a positive portrayal of demisexuality: the fact that this orientation does not explicitly lead to mental health issues, or that the characters are not directly discriminated against because of it provides a refreshing and heartwarming take on queer experiences. *The Love Hypothesis* and *Love, Theoretically* feature a journey of self-discovery and acceptance that echoes the narratives in the rest of literary works featuring asexual characters cited in the introduction. Olive's experiences with sexual attraction—her focus on an emotional connection, her delayed physical attraction, and her discomfort with casual relationships—are consistent with the most widely accepted definitions of demisexuality and central to the resolution of the romantic plot. Meanwhile, *Love, Theoretically* highlights the importance of being honest to oneself and to others to establish healthy emotional bonds, while also addressing the ongoing challenges of visibility and acceptance for individuals who do not fit conventional sexual paradigms. Therefore, Hazelwood's stories are a significant contribution to the romance genre, queer literature, and broader discussions on sexual identity, as they provide a positive outlook on the lives of people in the asexual spectrum, which refreshingly contrasts with a reality in which they are prone to mental health issues and even suicidality (Yule et al. 2013).

However, these novels also seem to fall into the social tendency observed by Przybylo, in which adults are expected to evolve into sexual beings, "that is, grow into being interested in sex and propelled by sexual desire" (2019, 93) and sexuality, though cleansed of some heteronormative issues, is still and end goal. It seems, then, as if demisexuality is an easy answer: it is very rarely problematised because the main characters feel mutual attraction on the same level and the erotonormative status quo can be maintained. Since *The Love Hypothesis* and *Love, Theoretically* reinforce certain traditional romance tropes, such as the significance of the sex scene as a pivotal moment, McAlister's concept of "compulsory demisexuality" serves to explain the convenient resolution of this contemporary romance, as it "is one of the most dominant cultural sexual scripts for women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, especially when it comes to virginity loss" (2020, 11). Certainly, genre conventions are met because of the fact that Olive and Elsie are demisexual, which could not have been possible if they belonged to other areas of the asexual spectrum which steer toward sex-aversion. Even though these novels provide a positive–or, following Allen, 'helpful'–representation of asexuality and demisexuality with characters whose path to intimacy and love is shaped not by conventional passion but by the slow building of trust and emotional connection, demisexuality operates as an excuse to ultimately fit within genre conventions and include the currently popular sex scenes of the contemporary romance market.

As this article has focused on two novels of the *STEMinist series*, the exploration of tropes and dynamics in connection with demisexuality in Hazelwood's oeuvre still leaves

room for further discussion. As Allen observes, there has been an "explosion" of scholarship in the last ten years regarding romance novels, particularly from the YA and New Adult genres, with a focus on women's, gender, and fandom studies (2020, 184). This article is merely a start in questioning demisexuality representation, and there is a need to study literary asexual representations as a whole from a modern understanding of the term. In this regard, the questions raised by Carter (2020) beg for further research on characters within the asexual spectrum: How many ARF novels are published in each future year, and through which channels? How favourable is the literary market to ace-spectrum voices? Will novels continue to educate characters (and readers) about asexuality? Will ace characters increasingly find their 'happily ever after' in the largest romance subgenre of cisgender heteroromantic novels, making those who identify as ace-spectrum just another love-worthy minority? (15). As the *STEMinist series* proves, demisexuality, though underrepresented, is gaining visibility in literature and other media, particularly in genres that value emotional depth and self-exploration, such as contemporary romance. As more writers and readers embrace the full spectrum of sexual identities, demisexual characters are likely to become more common and diverse in both their portrayals and the marketing campaigns of queer literature.

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