

**“You Freud, Me Jane?” The Representation of Trauma  
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AMBER WITSENBURG

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# **“You Freud, Me Jane?” The Representation of Trauma and Asexuality in Hitchcock’s *Marnie***

AMBER WITSENBURG<sup>\*</sup>

*Abstract: The title character of Hitchcock’s film Marnie (1964) has previously been interpreted as a repressed heterosexual or a closeted lesbian. However, as this paper will argue, it is more logical to read her as asexual. Interpreting her character as such, it becomes clear that the film presents a discursive framework based on compulsory sexuality. Most notably, Marnie’s lack of interest in sex is seen as a symptom of a childhood trauma, rather than as a sexual orientation in itself. This paper will therefore explore how the film links asexuality to trauma by means of the concept of repression, and thus deconstruct compulsory sexuality as the film presents it.*

*Keywords: Asexuality, trauma, Hitchcock, psychoanalysis*

**A**s many theorists of asexuality recognize (see for instance Flore or Kahn), there is a persistent view in contemporary Western society that asexuality is a pathological phenomenon rather than a sexual orientation like heterosexuality or homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> This prejudice should come as no surprise in the context of the dominant view of compulsory sexuality, which entails that

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<sup>\*</sup> Amber Witsenburg is a research master’s student of Literary Studies at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

<sup>1</sup> The definition of asexuality that I will be using in this paper is the one listed on the website of AVEN, which is the largest online platform for the asexual community. This definition is as follows: “An asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction.” Although this definition does not go undisputed in the (academic) asexual community nor in my own work, it will serve my purpose here as it is short and relatively easy to understand.

every human being experiences sexual attraction.<sup>2</sup> Sinwell discusses how asexuality is often related to “non-normative bodies and pathology” (162) in fictional television and film. Apparently, this is the only way asexuality can take shape in the dominant discourse of compulsory sexuality as it would otherwise disrupt the very system of (reproductive) sexuality that our society is built on.

The prejudice that sees asexuality as an illness to be cured can partly be traced back to psychoanalysis. Freud relates sexual “deviancy” to childhood trauma, most notably in his influential work “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1905). Here he explicates his theory of the Oedipal stage, linking sexual identity to developments in early childhood. Anything that goes “wrong” in the Oedipal stage can result in homosexuality (Freud, “Three Essays” 54) or asexuality (Freud, “Three Essays” 53).<sup>3</sup> This view has lingered in the field of psychology as it was only “in 1973 [that] the American Psychiatric Association decided to remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders” (Kahn 58), and a form of asexuality is still listed in the DSM as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD).<sup>4</sup> This illustrates how asexuality still needs to be articulated outside of medical discourse in order to have the potential to be recognized as a valid sexual orientation and identity category.

In order to problematize the link that psychoanalytic and psychiatric discourse makes between asexuality and trauma, I wish to explore the relation between the two by using a case study, namely Hitchcock’s film *Marnie* (1964), which – quite explicitly – relies on Freudian psychoanalysis, making it an appropriate research object for my purpose. In contrast to previous analyses of *Marnie*, I will interpret the title character of this film as asexual, and show how the film presents a childhood trauma as the cause for her asexuality. The male character Mark, who marries her, is perplexed by Marnie’s aversion to sex and attempts to “cure” her. During their honeymoon, he uses corrective rape in order to restore her “repressed” sexual urges. When this does not work, he starts psychoanalyzing her, and actively triggers her memories of the traumatic event in her childhood. At the end of the film he succeeds in doing so, and it appears that Marnie is “cured” from her asexuality when she willingly goes home with Mark.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “compulsory sexuality” is derived from Adrienne Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality, and is often used by the asexual community. I use it here instead of Rich’s term, as it is more relevant to asexuality as a concept.

<sup>3</sup> Freud does not theorize asexuality as we know it today here, but ascribes it to a latent incestuous desire.

<sup>4</sup> DSM: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

I will look at the film more critically by posing the following research question: How are trauma and sexual identity (un)linked in Hitchcock's film *Marnie*? After all, in a counter-reading to the film's narrative, one could argue that it is never certain that Marnie has become heterosexual, and the narrative merely exposes Mark's heteronormative frustration with the existence of asexuality.<sup>5</sup> In my analysis of the film, I will therefore deconstruct the compulsory sexuality that Mark represents and show how the potential of asexuality subverts it in the story. I will first discuss Marnie's asexuality and the manifestation of her childhood trauma. Next I will elaborate on the psychoanalytic basis of the film, following the reading of the plot that the film seems to invite, and finally look at the subversive potential of asexuality to this reading.

### **Marnie's asexuality and trauma**

Before I delve into the problems the film's basis of compulsory sexuality brings with it, I will first present a close reading that illustrates how one can interpret the character of Marnie as asexual. It becomes evident that Marnie does not experience sexual attraction when looking at parts of the dialogue – in which she explicitly addresses her lack of interest in sex – as well as in her behavior towards Mark. Of course, her refusal of one man does not necessarily mean that she is asexual – even if one would expect the male and female main characters to end up together in a Hollywood film – but her repeated statements that she has never been interested in other men either, are revealing.<sup>6</sup>

Having said this, as Lucretia Knapp states, “[the film is] suggesting an existence for Marnie other than a heterosexual one” (8), and as there is no

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout my paper I will use the terms “heteronormativity,” “heteropatriarchy,” and “compulsory sexuality” mostly interchangeably. Although these terms do not mean exactly the same thing (the first two also affect other sexual minorities, whereas compulsory sexuality is mostly detrimental to asexuals), they have the same oppressive effect on asexuals. As my focus is on asexuality, I will therefore use all of these terms to indicate a system in which asexuality is not acknowledged.

<sup>6</sup> I should also note here that I do not mean to entirely dismiss any other interpretation of Marnie's sexual orientation, since the film's conclusion mostly leaves this open. This means that I will not have conclusive proof that the character is asexual, other than a few hints that point towards this possibility. However, my aim is merely to entertain the notion that Marnie could be asexual, in order to comment on the framework of compulsory sexuality that the film is based on. The simple fact that the film itself seems to actively steer its viewers away from the reading of Marnie as asexual, reveals much about the discursive power compulsory sexuality holds over cultural products.

evidence in the narrative that she is attracted to any other gender, an asexual orientation would be more convincing than, for instance, a lesbian one as suggested by Knapp (7). Indeed, Mark is presented as her only potential love interest, but the attention he gives her mostly leaves her cold. In fact, as the beginning of the film shows, the only reason she starts a relationship with him at all is because he blackmails her after discovering that she stole large amounts of money from a series of employers, and he eventually even forces her to marry him. The power dynamic this brings into their relationship sees Mark feeling entitled to her, while Marnie retains power in rejecting him. This leads Mark (arrogantly) to wonder why he cannot get Marnie to love him back, and he starts on a quest to find out the reason.

Indeed, when Mark notices Marnie's indifference towards him, he starts questioning her and finds out that she has never had a relationship. He says, "you know, I can't believe you, Marnie. There must've been a great many men interested in you," to which she responds, "I didn't say men weren't interested in me. I wasn't interested in them," suggesting that "them" means men in general. Her aversion to sex becomes even clearer in her warnings to Mark, such as "if you touch me again, I'll die" and "I cannot bear to be handled." Not only is Marnie not attracted to Mark, or anyone else for that matter, but she finds sex repulsive to the point where she panics when confronted with it. This idea is further expressed in Marnie's body language. In the first half of the film, a scene occurs in which Mark and Marnie find themselves alone in the stables attached to the former's mansion. They kiss, but afterward Marnie looks away with an unhappy expression on her face, suggesting her affection was merely acted. It is clear that she is not attracted to Mark, but perhaps goes along with his fantasy, hoping to escape the hold he has over her. Again, Marnie's revulsion of Mark is perhaps not representative of the way she feels about others, but her assertion that she is not interested in other men makes it seem that this could be the case after all.

What is more, after they are married, Marnie refuses to have sex with Mark on multiple occasions. During the nights of their honeymoon they sleep in separate beds, and Marnie wears – to quite a comic effect – a nightgown that covers her entire body to her ankles. This makes it all the more shocking when Mark has finally had enough of the imposed celibacy he initially gracefully accepted. One night during their honeymoon he forces himself on her, in response to her hostility towards him. At first she attempts to resist him, but when she realizes she is helpless she seems to become apathetic, and simply

stares into space. The next morning Marnie attempts suicide and Mark is only just in time to save her life. The rape scene in *Marnie* presents an instance of corrective rape, as it suggests that Mark wants to trigger Marnie's "repressed" heterosexuality by forcing her to have sex.

This scene further seems to be symbolic of the power dynamic in Marnie and Mark's relationship as well as of compulsory sexuality when faced with the disruption of asexuality. In his discussion of the film, Kyle Barrowman, who uses Jacques Lacan's notion of sexed identity, interprets the raping of Marnie as constitutive of Mark's symbolic death "as a sexed being" (15). As Derek Hook explains, following Lacan, one becomes a "sexed subject" after "tak[ing] up a relation to the phallic signifier" (79). According to Barrowman, Mark's identity is seemingly constituted by the phallus, but a type of castration occurs when Mark is continuously rejected by Marnie (15). Indeed, as Slavoj Žižek remarks, "the more he shows his power, the more his impotence is confirmed" (qtd. in Barrowman 15). As I already noted, the power Mark displays mostly consists of his blackmailing Marnie into a meek acceptance of his advances, and later into marriage. Yet, he cannot force her to become attracted to him. When his frustration with this fact culminates in rape, followed by Marnie's suicide attempt, it is clear that Mark has failed in his symbolic role of the patriarchal figure, which is defined by the phallic signifier, as he holds no real power over Marnie. Mark is unable to make Marnie desire him, and thus fails to subject her to the symbolic order of heteropatriarchy (or compulsory sexuality), which he evidently represents.

Instead of accepting his failure, however, Mark resists his symbolic death "as a sexed being" (Barrowman 15) and decides that he needs to find out the possible cause of Marnie's disinterest in sex, hoping to cure her by going to the root of what he sees as a mental disorder. It turns out that Marnie does suffer from the consequences of a childhood trauma, which Mark immediately relates to her asexuality. As Mark observes, Marnie relives her trauma whenever she is confronted with certain triggers, which invoke the same panicked response in her as when she is confronted with sex. For example, throughout the film, there are instances in which she sees the color red, causing her to have a panic attack. During these instances, the camera focuses on her panic-stricken face, while a red haze pulsates in and out of the screen. Meanwhile, the soundtrack adds suspense with quick violin music. These effects make it clear right away that the color red means something to Marnie, and finding out what that is becomes the movie's

central plot drive. The same effect occurs during thunder storms, which leave Marnie completely helpless in her panic. Other scenes that are notable in this regard are when she has nightmares, during which she speaks in her sleep in a childlike voice and suddenly with a different accent. Her evident distress indicates that this is another symptom of her trauma, and the way she speaks in her sleep links this to her childhood.

### **The psychoanalytic view**

The way in which the film presents Marnie's trauma in these instances is reminiscent of Freud's theorization of traumatic neurosis. Following Freud, Cathy Caruth provides the following definition of trauma: "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). These intrusive phenomena can include "nightmares and repetitive actions" (Caruth 4). As I just illustrated, this is certainly true for Marnie, who has frequent panic attacks. Yet, she cannot access the original event that caused her symptoms. According to Freud, the overwhelming event that causes trauma is repressed and the trauma victim "is obliged rather to *repeat* as a current experience what is repressed" ("Pleasure Principle" 18, italics in original). This would then explain her initial incapability to discover what has caused her symptoms. The traumatic event that Marnie compulsively returns to is presented as a forgotten secret that needs to be uncovered.

If Marnie's asexuality is then similarly seen as a consequence of her trauma, it is clear that it does not follow the same pattern of her other symptoms. Through her lack of sexual attraction, Marnie does not relive the original event, but apparently attempts to repress it entirely. This is at least what Mark seems to think. Having observed her panicked reactions to some of her triggers, he immediately makes a link between her refusal to have sex with him and what he clearly sees as a childhood trauma. For instance, when he questions her about her refusal to let him touch her, Mark asks "what happened to you?" and "[have] you ever tried to talk about it, to a doctor or somebody who could help you?" He also starts reading books with conspicuous titles such as "sexual aberrations of the criminal female," which additionally creates a link to Marnie's criminal activities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Establishing links between criminality and the sexually nonnormative has a long tradition in fiction. I will not go into detail about this here, as I am more interested in the

Mark and Marnie even have a conversation about the former's attempts to psychoanalyze Marnie, who dismisses these as unnecessary and intrusive. She sneers, "You Freud, me Jane?", thus making the references to psychoanalysis explicit. The way in which she actively resists a Freudian interpretation of her sexual identity suggests a counter-reading to the one Mark imposes on the narrative, which I will discuss in the next section.

The references to psychoanalysis in the film invite an interpretation that follows Freud's psychoanalytic theories of both trauma and sexuality. Freud links these in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" by theorizing how repression works both for traumatic neurosis and the sexual instincts. He explains how the pleasure principle, which involves a constant striving for pleasurable experiences, becomes subverted when a source of pleasure becomes associated with pain after a traumatic experience: "[i]f they [particular instincts] then succeed, as so easily happens with the repressed sex-impulses, in fighting their way through – along circuitous routes – to a direct or a substitutive gratification, this success, which might otherwise have brought pleasure, is experienced by the ego as 'pain'" ("Pleasure Principle" 6). Applying this statement to the film, one could say that Marnie subconsciously associates sex with her trauma, and thus with pain. Evidently, this is what Mark thinks when he finally confronts Marnie's mother at the end of the film. He tells her: "Do you also know that your daughter [...] cannot stand to have a man touch her? Any man? She doesn't know why, but you do. Don't you think you owe it to her to help her to understand what happened to make her like this?" In other words, he wants Marnie's mother to reveal the origin of Marnie's trauma, so that she will know that there is indeed a reason for her "unnatural" sexuality and can move on from there.

In the end, it is not Marnie's mother who finally tells her what happened, but Marnie narrates it herself. Whilst there is a thunderstorm outside, another panic attack is triggered, and Marnie again returns to her repressed memories of the traumatic event in her childhood. Only this time she remembers exactly what happened, and apparently tells it to her mother and Mark. However, for the spectator of the film a flashback appears that shows this in detail. It turns out that Marnie's mother used to be a prostitute, and she had a sailor visiting her on the fateful night. Whilst a thunderstorm was raging outside, this sailor started comforting a young Marnie, who was frightened by it. Marnie's mother, who

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connection that is made between asexuality and trauma, but this is another aspect of *Marnie* that would be worthwhile to study.



thought he was molesting her, then started attacking him, which resulted in a struggle between them. This struggle ended with Marnie killing the sailor by hitting him over the head with a poker.

I find it particularly interesting that it is indeed Marnie who has to remember and narrate the traumatic event, rather than her mother, since this is precisely what Freud suggests as a cure for trauma victims. He stresses that the patient needs to reconstruct his/her memories so that the unconscious can become conscious, and any resistance to treatment is abandoned ("Pleasure Principle" 17). Indeed, at the end of the film, it seems as if Marnie is "cured" of both her panic attacks and her asexuality, as she finally faced her trauma and, as the ending seems to suggest, can now move on. She also decides to stay with Mark, thus apparently surrendering to the dominant order of compulsory sexuality.

### **Unlinking trauma and sexual identity**

Although the ending of *Marnie* certainly seems to invite an interpretation along these lines, Marnie suddenly having become heterosexual ultimately appears unconvincing when seeing the symptoms of Marnie's trauma as separate from her sexual orientation – and, most importantly, seeing her asexuality as a sexual orientation. Richard Allen's interpretation of the film's ending comes closer to this conclusion, as he writes in his book *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*: "Marnie's memory of the trauma cures nothing" (103), as the characters in the film misinterpret the nature of the trauma as it is narrated by Marnie. However, instead of acknowledging the possibility of asexuality, Allen comes up with an alternate interpretation of what "caused" her asexuality. Her trauma, according to him, lies not in the fact that she killed a person, "but in her mother's guilt about the fact that she emotionally abandoned Marnie," thus "reproducing within Marnie her own emotional deadness and strangling her capacity for affection" (103). Although Allen may be correct in his conviction that Marnie's asexuality cannot be cured by her reiteration of a traumatic event, he errs in his attempt to find another trauma to connect to her lack of interest in sex. If Marnie is indeed asexual, sexuality for her is not something she represses, but something that has never existed for her.

To elaborate, I should revert to Freudian psychoanalysis, which uses the notion of repression as a basis for theorizing sexuality. In his "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," Freud states that "[w]e have come to learn [...] that every

human being is bisexual [...] and that his libido is distributed, either in a manifest or a latent fashion, over objects of both sexes" (244). In other words, he claims that everyone potentially experiences sexual attraction to both men and women, but one of these types of attraction becomes repressed, except in bisexuals. Applying this theorization to asexuals, one could argue that their libido – or more correctly, their sexuality<sup>8</sup> – is entirely latent, as they do not experience sexual attraction to any gender. However, I would like to propose an alternative interpretation of (a)sexuality, which is that this type of repression does not exist at all, meaning that there is no (hetero)sexuality to be restored for asexuals or other LGBT+ groups. The consequences this has for a reading of *Marnie* are considerable, both when looking at the character of Marnie, and when focusing on the narrative of the film.

Indeed, if a sexual orientation is not based on repression, the link that is made between trauma and sexual orientation becomes nonsensical. As I noted before, Freud theorizes that the traumatized subject represses the traumatic event, as it is too overwhelming, and is then "obliged rather to *repeat* as a current experience what is repressed" ("Pleasure Principle" 18, italics in original). Asexuality is not something that is repeated, but merely consists of something that is not there and never was. To be sure, when theorizing sexuality as something that is based on repression, it is possible to link sexuality to trauma, as it would actually be possible to repress a sexual orientation – perhaps in response to a traumatic event. However, using my hypothesis, sexuality cannot be repressed in a similar way to a traumatic memory, and can therefore not be recovered in the manner that *Marnie's* ending suggests.

Furthermore, this reconceptualization of (a)sexuality has consequences for the film's narrative. In her chapter titled "Toward an Asexual Narrative Structure," Elizabeth Hanna Hanson outlines Peter Brooks's theory that desire motivates the plot of every narrative structure (350). She furthermore discusses the necessity of a narrative secret to be uncovered at the end of a story. To both of these narrative requirements, asexuality forms a drastic disruption, as it negates desire, and, as Hanson memorably states: "[w]hat asexuals hide is the fact that they have nothing to hide; their sexual secret is that they have no sexual secret. The asexual closet, then, is empty, is not even a closet" (350). Looking at asexuality this way,

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<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the way sexuality is theorized nowadays, Freud does not make a distinction between libido and sexuality (or sexual orientation). Many asexuals do have a libido, which illustrates that the two are largely unrelated.

*Marnie's* subversive potential comes to light. As I illustrated, the entire plot of this film revolves around Mark's "curing" of Marnie's asexuality and uncovering the trauma that caused her to "repress" her supposed sexual urges. However, if Marnie's sexuality is not repressed, but simply not present, there is nothing to be solved, and nothing to drive the plot.

This disruption to *Marnie's* narrative is caused by the way the very concept of asexuality threatens the structure of compulsory sexuality that the film is based on. As I have shown, Mark, who seems to represent this structure, uses psychoanalytic tactics to attempt to access that which is beyond his grasp, namely asexuality. Because of this approach, his attempts are, however, doomed from the beginning. Marnie is illegible to him in the same way trauma is illegible to the trauma victim. Although Marnie's trauma becomes accessible – or at least narratable – at the end of the film, the real secret that drives the plot, that which causes Marnie to be incapable of experiencing sexual attraction, remains a mystery. At the end of the narrative, Mark is just as clueless as he was at the beginning, as if nothing actually happened. After all, he searches for something to ascribe Marnie's lack of interest in sex to, but, like Allen, misinterprets the nature of her trauma (103) and therefore forestalls closure. Even more drastically, however, I would argue that his entire project is misguided from the start, because of his inability to acknowledge asexuality as a form of existence. Hanson refers to this failure in narrative drive as "asexual stasis" (352) which she sees as a narrative disruption that forms a "cessation of movement" (351) and thus precludes closure. Indeed, it seems that *Marnie's* narrative is characterized by a kind of stasis that is linked to what is unknown, as the unknown in *Marnie* simply does not have a discursive framework it can exist in.

My reading in some ways conforms to Barrowman's interpretation of the film, although his analysis is mostly made from Mark's perspective. As I stated earlier, the rape scene in *Marnie* constitutes Mark's symbolic death, for he is unable to trigger Marnie's heterosexual interest in him. Barrowman goes further in his analysis, as he sees Mark as a representative of the phallic order, which means "his symbolic death is the death of Man" (15). Indeed, Marnie's asexuality and Mark's failed attempts to make her heterosexual, show the failure of heteropatriarchy in imposing its norms of sexuality. In the context of this heteropatriarchy and its compulsory sexuality, asexuality becomes impossible to grasp, which is why Mark, as well as many – if not all – theorists that have written on *Marnie*, considers her lack of sexual desire a symptom of trauma. When

separating Marnie's sexuality from her trauma, however, the radical disruption of asexuality to the dominant framework of compulsory sexuality that the film presents, becomes visible. This disruption displaces sexual normativity and, while exposing the failure of heteropatriarchy, potentially produces a new type of discursive framework beyond compulsory sexuality in which asexuality can exist.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have explored how trauma and asexuality are linked in Hitchcock's *Marnie*. It is clear that Mark sees Marnie's disinterest in sex as an unhealthy consequence of a childhood trauma, rather than a valid sexual orientation. By viewing asexuality in this light, Mark symbolizes the dominant discourse of compulsory sexuality, which is present in the film's narrative as well as in contemporary Western society. It is also evident that he oppresses Marnie, first by blackmailing her into marrying him, then by raping her, and finally by psychoanalyzing her until he is convinced that he has cured her. For him, Marnie's asexuality does not make sense, and it does not have a place in his world. He therefore attempts to bully her into subjecting herself to the (hetero)normative order that he represents. However, the only thing he achieves in doing so is demonstrating how asexuality forms such a radical disruption to this symbolic order that the latter cannot exist if the existence of asexuality is acknowledged. After all, if Mark would accept asexuality as a way of being instead of as something that should be changed, the discursive framework of compulsory (hetero)sexuality would need to be drastically altered to make the asexual subject legible – puncturing Mark's heteronormative fantasy.

Indeed, after my initial analysis of the film, I proposed an alternative way of theorizing (a)sexuality, which is not based on repression as it is in psychoanalysis. As I illustrated, the film invites a psychoanalytic reading because of its explicit references to psychoanalysis. Resisting such a reading, however, leads to more insights into the film's subversive potential. I discussed how Freud connects the repressive nature of trauma to the repression of sexuality in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," and how the character of Mark follows this interpretation. Using a theory of sexuality in which repression does not exist, I unlinked the connection between sexuality and trauma and showed how arbitrary this connection is in the first place. Interpreting the ending of *Marnie* in this way, it is obvious that the title character's reiteration of her childhood trauma does not make her heterosexual, as she simply is not heterosexual and probably never will

be. Yet this renders Marnie illegible in the film's framework of compulsory sexuality, which is why it must present her asexuality as pathological. In this way, the plot still seems to stumble towards a conclusion, even though there may not actually be one; indeed, I would say instead that the film's narrative is characterized by what Hanson terms "asexual stasis" (352). This stasis can only be acknowledged if Marnie's asexuality gets acknowledged, too: if Marnie's asexuality is not a symptom of trauma, there is nothing to "cure," either. *Marnie's* plot thus consists of Mark's heteronormative fantasy, which is easily subverted when asexuality is acknowledged as a sexual orientation.

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