

The Queer Possibilities of Aromantic Reading

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Introduction

What's Aromantic About Queer Studies Now?

Aromanticism refers to those who experience “little to no romantic attraction to others.”¹

Although this orientation has received more attention within queer spaces in recent years, recognition remains an issue for the aromantic community, both in everyday life and in queer and literary scholarship. There are a handful of scholars working to remedy this problem, such as Liza Blake and Jenna McKellips at the University of Toronto who have created an “Asexuality and Aromanticism Bibliography” collecting the limited research in this field, but the majority of the work being done on aromanticism remains outside of academia within online aromantic spaces.²

This lack of critical attention to aromanticism can be linked to a variety of factors, including the tendency to treat aromanticism as a subset of asexuality rather than as an orientation in its own right. As Hannah Tessler notes, however, aromantic census data shows that over half of aromantic people do not identify as asexual.³ This distinction is especially important in discussions about relationship and family formation (and non-formation) because while asexual people who are not aromantic tend to desire more conventional romantic partnerships and nuclear families, aromantic people (asexual and otherwise) are more likely to desire alternative relationship dynamics (such as queer-platonic partnerships and found families) and non-partnered futures.⁴ Even more impactful

¹ “Aromantic-Spectrum Union for Recognition, Education, and Advocacy,” AUREA, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://www.aromanticism.org/>.

² Liza Blake and Jenna McKellips, “The Asexuality and Aromanticism Bibliography,” November 21, 2024, <https://acearobiblio.com/>.

³ Hannah Tessler, “Aromanticism, Asexuality, and Relationship (Non-)Formation: How a-Spec Singles Challenge Romantic Norms and Reimagine Family Life,” *Sexualities*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231197061>, 7.

⁴ Tessler, “Aromanticism, Asexuality, and Relationship (Non-)Formation,” 10-11.

than this conflation of aromanticism and asexuality, however, is the influence of what Elizabeth Brake refers to as “amatonormativity,” “the widespread assumption that everyone is better off in an exclusive, romantic, long-term coupled relationship, and that everyone is seeking such a relationship.”⁵ When “true love” in the couple form is considered to be the goal that everyone is striving for, we assume it must be lurking beneath the surface of every text, even when explicitly stated otherwise.

This is a belief that even queer studies is not immune to. As Megan Cole points out, “amatonormativity is not absent from queer thought; queer theory, at times, reinscribes the primacy of romantic or sexual dyads.”⁶ Up until recently, the predilection of queer literary studies has been to follow in Eve Sedgwick’s footsteps and read the absence of heterosexual attraction as proof of homosexual attraction rather than reading that absence as queer in and of itself. While Sedgwick’s brand of queer reading has been invaluable to queer scholarship, it has also precluded certain readings from our research. Queer readings have historically relied upon *reading into* literary works in an effort to locate queer desire within the ambiguities and subtext. These efforts have been essential to queer literary studies and should by no means be discounted. However, the almost exclusive adoption of this type of reading in queer literary scholarship has foreclosed certain readings, such as interpreting the absence of heterosexual desire as an a possible site for aromanticism or asexuality.

⁵ Elizabeth Brake, “Amatonormativity,” accessed November 18, 2024, <https://elizabethbrake.com/amatonormativity/>.

⁶ Megan Cole, “The Fiction of Amatonormativity: Reactions to Queer Platonic Relationships in Eighteenth-Century Literature,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 36, no. 2 (April 1, 2024): 269–92, <https://doi.org/10.3138/ecf.36.2.269>, 272.

To confront the problem of aromantic illegibility, then, we must not only acknowledge aromanticism as an orientation that may or may not be present in a text but also resist the tendency to presume romantic desire as a default or universal experience.

Method

What might it mean to read aromantically? In *Reading the Romance*, Radway argues that romance readers supply romantic significance to simple, straightforward texts by bringing forth “mastered cultural codes and conventions.”⁷ This provides useful insight into the invisibility of aromanticism by illustrating how readers apply their own assumptions to a text as part of the reading process. This means even when aromanticism is present in a work (or romance is absent), the ambiguities in the text may be subsumed into a romantic reading as a result of the reader supplying amatonormative cultural conventions. Reading aromantically can thus be understood as a practice of *resisting* these assumptions.

While romance attempts to avoid associations of reading with labor, *aromance* requires the reader to be an active participant in the process of refusing and un-knowing amatonormative conventions and making meaning anew. It is only possible to read romantically if one questions the fictions of amatonormativity. When faced with a woman uninterested in men, an amatonormative reading suggests she is likely in denial, playing coy, or—in the case of a queer amatonormative reading—a lesbian. These readings are not necessarily false—indeed, in many cases, they are even likely—but the predilection to default to them demonstrates how amatonormative reading practices

⁷ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 197.

preclude aromantic possibilities from being considered at all. If, as Radway notes, romance aims to “combat ambiguity,” we can understand “aromance” to be doing the opposite.⁸ Aromantic literature revels in vagueness, in absence, in the fostering of doubt toward the assumptions we take to be true. Aromantic reading is a process of *embracing* ambiguity, of refusing normativity, of reading absence as absence—of reading absence itself as queer.

Context

Although the term “aromantic” was coined within the last few decades, the feelings (or lack thereof) that it describes were present long before then, even if they were not articulated in the same ways and did not constitute a distinct “identity” the way they do now. This project will focus on aromantic resonances in American literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As scholars like Benjamin Kahan have pointed out, this is a key period for queer studies as it marks the transition to taxonomized queerness in the form of sexology.⁹ However, while Kahan chooses to view marriage, sex, and love as fairly synonymous in his work in *Celibacies*, this thesis focuses specifically on romance.

As Michael Paramo notes in his recent book on asexuality, aromanticism, and agender identity titled *Ending the Pursuit*, the rationalizing logic of colonialism in the 1800s created a distinction between romantic love and sexual desire that posited romance or “true love” as something the “savage

⁸ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 196.

⁹ Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822377184>.

races” were incapable of feeling or expressing.¹⁰ Paramo points out how colonizers perceived Indigenous men as shackled to violent sexual drives while boasting that the desires of “civilized” European men were based in a chivalric adoration of women. The splitting of sexual and romantic attraction is therefore not only possible in retrospective scholarship, but was, in fact, part of the cultural consciousness at the time. In addition to separating sexual desire from “true love,” this era saw a separation of sex from marriage in the rhetoric of the White Cross Army. Started in 1883, the White Cross Army was a movement that encouraged celibacy, especially in men. Married men were encouraged to abstain from sexual relations and to base their marriages instead on “pure” love and a chivalrous respect for women. Although the “White” in White Cross Army was meant to symbolize this celibate purity rather than any white supremacist values, it is not insignificant that this label resonates with the colonial aims of the nineteenth-century glorification of romantic love.

The drastic economic changes that occurred throughout the 1800s further elevated romantic love as a distinct ideal. As John D’Emilio notes in “Capitalism & Gay Identity,” the nineteenth century saw a steady decline in marriage rates as remaining unmarried was finally a viable option.¹¹ Prior to this moment, marriage was viewed as the only way for many—women especially—to achieve social and financial security. In the years following the American Revolution, however, women gained limited property rights and opportunities to work outside of the home. Wage labor and the commercial sale of goods made it possible for more individuals of any gender to break off from the traditional family model. The so-called “Cult of Single Blessedness” emerged during this time. Cult members vowed not

¹⁰ Michael Paramo, *Ending the Pursuit: Asexuality, Aromanticism & Agender Identity* (London: Unbound, 2024).

¹¹ John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York, New York: Routledge, 1993), 467–76.

to marry for “shallow” reasons such as economic advancement but instead to wait for “true love.”

Contrary to what one might think, this Cult represented a glorification of romance even as it lent respectability to unmarried life, elevating the romantic ideals of marriage even as economic pressures toward marriage decreased. With the material rationale for marriage and the nuclear family diminished, the emotional and spiritual benefits were stressed as more important than ever—a sign of civilization and a vital reprieve from the alienation of work under capitalism. By the 1920s, the view of romantic love as the apex of American life and the center of social and emotional connection was solidified.¹²

Where before romantic love was perceived as less important than more practical concerns and in many cases even irrelevant to the question of marriage, romantic feeling surpassed financial pressures and reproductive responsibilities as the main reasons for marriage, making an *absence* of these feelings more remarkable than ever before.

Road Map

In what follows, we will consider the queer possibilities of this absence within a variety of texts, and in doing so, we will further articulate the features and affordances of the aromantic lens. The first chapter dives deeper into what it means to read aromantically, offering a counter to the brand of queer reading pioneered by Sedgwick which forecloses aromantic possibilities by reading “absence” as “evidence” of something else. Through a close-reading of Sarah Orne Jewett’s famous “spinster” novel *A Country Doctor*, we will analyze how Jewett makes aromanticism legible through the creation of an “aromantic type” and consider what it might mean to engage deeply with this proto-aromantic

¹² D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity.”

identity by resisting amatonormative interpretations of the text. In the second chapter, we will look at Jewett's *A Marsh Island* and Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" as we break down how the aromantic type "fails" when trapped within the confines of an amatonormative narrative—and what this failure says about the societal perception of romantic love as the thing that gives structure and meaning to life and time. Since romance is frequently used in narratives as a tool for character growth, aromantic typology often becomes a symbol for the negative traits a romantic arc would "fix" or deem resolved. Aromantic narratives can thus appear as rejections of "character arcs" altogether which mimics modern prejudices against aromantic individuals who are frequently seen as immature, selfish, or afraid of commitment as a result of their refusal to "settle down." In the third chapter, we will further investigate these aromantic "refusals" in Jewett's most famous work *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in addition to two short stories, "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin and "A Moral Exigency" by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. In this section, we consider the question of what aromanticism might be orienting *toward* in orienting away from romance—what Jewett refers to in *A Country Doctor* as a yearning for "The Great Something Else."¹³

By analyzing these texts in a way that resists amatonormative assumptions, I aim to build a foundation for a new interpretative tradition that makes aromantic readings possible where previously they were unlikely—not because romance is universal in our texts, but because our cultural conventions encourage us to interpret romantic love as being at the heart of every story. In an article titled "The Fiction of Amatonormativity," Megan Cole writes, "When I say that amatonormativity is fictional, I mean two things. First, the construct is false; it is not true that romantic dyads are the only

¹³ Sarah Orne Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, Penguin Classics (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 115.

logical or successful means of organizing society, as history proves. Second, the persistence and success of amatonormativity relies on distancing potential alternatives to marriage/romance from reality.”¹⁴

Only by exposing this fiction and highlighting the triumphs of these relational alternatives in the past can we begin to embrace the ripe possibilities of aromantic futures.

¹⁴ Cole, “The Fiction of Amatonormativity,” 274.

Chapter 1

Aromantic Legibility: Reading Absence as Absence

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick lays out a method of queer reading that “interpret[s] ‘absence’ (preterition, silence, the closet, the love that dare not speak its name, the ‘impossibility’ of lesbian sex) as ‘evidence’ of same-sex eroticism.”¹⁵ While this work has been invaluable to queer literary studies, opening up space for homosexual interpretations where previously there was only silence, defaulting to this approach forecloses other possible readings. In queer literary studies, we have all but written off the idea of reading absence as absence, assuming that a lack of romantic feeling or action must be indicative of something else, from repressed homosexuality to selfishness or immaturity to political affiliation with a celibate cause. In feminist scholarship, on the other hand, it is common to subsume aromantic relationalities into political endeavors and reform efforts, directing the focus of the conversation not toward a character’s lack of romantic desire but toward their dedication to a cause ‘worthier’ than the personal happiness they might achieve by pursuing true love. In literary criticism more broadly, there is a tendency to view bachelors and spinsters as undesirable, deviantly gendered, or otherwise ‘failed’ participants in the marriage market. Even when these individuals express no desire to be married or they find fulfillment in other pursuits, our unconscious biases transform their triumphant happy endings into tragedies by suggesting that unmarried life can only ever be a consolation for the true prize of mutually-fulfilling romantic love.

¹⁵ Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822377184>, 3.

Beneath all these assumptions lies amatonormativity: the belief that everyone, deep down, desires romantic partnership.¹⁶ This desire may be disallowed by its same-sex nature, thwarted by personal or systemic failings, or sacrificed in favor of some higher goal, but the assumption stands, nonetheless, that they must desire it. As Paramo writes of contemporary aromantics, “the people who we reveal our identities to often embark on a pursuit to find a ‘real’ reason for our identities rather than to accept the uncomfortable possibilities that . . . aromanticism . . . create[s].”¹⁷ Indeed, within the “absence as evidence” framework, a female character with aromantic tendencies may have her lack of romantic attraction reasoned away through interpretations that depict her as impoverished, unattractive, overly-masculine, a lesbian, or a suffragist, while her male counterpart is read as depraved, immature, effeminate, a gay man, a rake, or a mugwump.

To reject this framework and embrace aromanticism, Paramo argues, “requires expanding the dominant worldview of what is possible.”¹⁸ What possibilities open up when we include aromanticism in our literary criticism? When we choose to read absence as absence and amatonormativity as fictional?¹⁹ An aromantic reading of *A Country Doctor* by Sarah Orne Jewett reveals the insufficiency of interpretations that ignore these possibilities while simultaneously demonstrating how “absence” can be made readable.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Brake, “Amatonormativity,” accessed November 18, 2024, <https://elizabethbrake.com/amatonormativity/>.

¹⁷ Michael Paramo, *Ending the Pursuit: Asexuality, Aromanticism & Agender Identity* (London: Unbound, 2024), 11.

¹⁸ Paramo, *Ending the Pursuit*, 41.

¹⁹ Megan Cole, “The Fiction of Amatonormativity: Reactions to Queer Platonic Relationships in Eighteenth-Century Literature,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 36, no. 2 (April 1, 2024): 269–92, <https://doi.org/10.3138/ecf.36.2.269>.

Sarah Orne Jewett's "Aromantic Type"

“[A] restless, impatient, miserable sort of longing for The Great Something Else.”²⁰ This is how Nan Prince’s guardian refers to her desire for a life outside of marriage in Sarah Orne Jewett’s 1884 novel *A Country Doctor*. Orphaned at a young age and left in the care of the local physician, Nan dreams of following in his footsteps and becoming a doctor herself. She persists in this goal despite societal judgment, and in the end, “of her own free choice,” she “rejects the honest love of an honest man which she in part returns.”²¹ Nan Prince’s status as a career woman and spinster heroine has attracted much attention in reviews and literary scholarship, but what compels my scholarly interest is Nan’s “partial” love. In Jewett’s effort to make the case that some women are more fit for professional life than for marriage, she opts to depict Nan not as an “everywoman” chafing under patriarchal expectations but as an individual uniquely disconnected from the concept of romantic attraction. It is difficult to tell how much of this can be ascribed to Jewett’s views and how much is purely tactical, taking the teeth out of what might otherwise have been an inflammatory critique but was instead well-received even by many of Jewett’s more conservative reviewers.²² Regardless of the motivation behind this choice, however, Nan’s resulting characterization resonates deeply with aromanticism in ways that set her apart from other unmarried protagonists in nineteenth-century literature. In spite of this difference, an aromantic interpretation of this novel has yet to be fully articulated in

²⁰ Sarah Orne Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, Penguin Classics (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 115.

²¹ Kathrine Cole Aydelott, “Maine Stream: A Bibliographic Reception Study of Sarah Orne Jewett” (University of Connecticut, 2005), <https://scholars.unh.edu/aydelott/1/>, 98.

²² Aydelott, “Maine Stream,” 87.

scholarship—an oversight that is representative of aromanticism’s relative absence from literary studies as a whole.

Nan Prince appears at first as merely another in a long line of unmarried protagonists in nineteenth-century literature. Although these heroes and heroines go on journeys of independence and self-discovery, in the end, their character growth is almost always rewarded with mutual love and marriage.²³ This literary tradition aligns with America’s cultural views toward marriage at the time since economic changes allowed many to view romantic love as the primary reason to marry. Departing from both this elevated vision of love and the literary tradition of rebellious independence serving as a stepping stone on the way to married life, Nan Prince makes the bold choice to reject George Gerry’s proposal and dedicate her life to her professional ambitions instead of to a nuclear family. Whatever “partial” love Nan feels is not sufficient to dissuade her from either her career aspirations or her blessed singleness.

It must be noted that it was not unprecedented for women in nineteenth-century literature to choose a career over marriage. Fanny Fern’s 1854 novel *Ruth Hall* famously ends with Ruth choosing not to marry. However, Ruth’s opposition to marriage stems not from a disinterest in romantic love but rather from an opposition to the assumption that women should depend on others for their financial security. Fern takes pains to characterize Ruth as a grieving widow who deeply loved her late husband and was left destitute after his passing. Although Ruth eventually comes to value the freedom of widowhood and the ability to provide for herself through writing, her story is as much one of heartbreak and grief as it is of independence and professionalism. In contrast, Jewett provides us with a

²³ “Bachelors and Spinsters,” in Encyclopedia.com, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/bachelors-and-spinsters>.

“career woman” novel of a more aromatic type. Although much of the novel focuses on the sexist restrictions on women’s agency that arise from societal expectations around marriage, there are several points of departure. In one notable scene, Dr. Leslie tells a colleague that he has taken Nan under his wing, and the other doctor replies, “I have had a protégé myself, but I don’t look for much future joy in watching the development of my plots. . . . I saw him married the day before I left England. . . . I turned my bank account into a cheque and tucked it into his pocket, and told him to marry his wife and settle down and be respectable and forget such a wandering old fellow as I.”²⁴ The fate of this other doctor’s protégé demonstrates how the expectation that marriage will trump professional aspirations is not limited by gender, even if it tends to be more restricting for women. Dr. Leslie likewise theorizes that “a man *or* woman” who has the “sort of self-dependence and unnatural self-reliance” that he observes in Nan is unlikely to ever marry, suggesting that more than a woman’s ability to pursue a profession is at stake here.²⁵

Indeed, the fact that marriage and career are more frequently mutually exclusive for women than for men may be vital to understanding the novel, but it is insufficient for understanding Nan. While Nan celebrates the prospect of marriage and “the building and keeping of a sweet home-life” for those around her, “for herself she avoided unconsciously all approach or danger of it.”²⁶ This unconscious avoidance of romantic possibilities is one of the ways in which “absence” becomes readable within the novel. Nan’s lack of romantic desire consistently “others” her in the eyes of her peers and mentors. In one such scene, Nan’s aunt looks on while Nan speaks with George Gerry and

²⁴ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 77-78.

²⁵ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 92-93. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 107.

the captain: “Nan was talking to the two gentlemen as if she had already been to her room to smooth her hair, which her aunt looked at reproachfully from time to time . . . The girl was quite unconscious of herself, and glad to have the company and sympathy of these kind friends.”²⁷ While Nan’s aunt treats this scene as a visit from a potential suitor—for which Nan is woefully ungroomed—Nan regards it as a strictly platonic affair. The lack of concern she has for her wild hair and the ease with which she classifies both men as friends suggest not only a lack of romantic attraction but a lack of awareness of romantic expectations and their accompanying social tensions. Nan’s attitude in this scene disturbs her aunt, who attributes it to her unorthodox country upbringing. Dr. Leslie, however, distinguishes Nan’s behavior even from the other children in the countryside. “Nan’s feeling toward her boy-playmates is exactly the same as toward the girls she knows,” the doctor says in a discussion with a neighbor. “You have only to look at the rest of the children together to see the difference.”²⁸ Even from an early age, the other children’s feelings are filtered through heteroromanticism, but Nan is clearly distinguishable from them due to her lack of this particular type of feeling. In this way, Dr. Leslie frames absence (ie. Nan’s lack of desire) as what queers her.

One of the ways in which Jewett makes this absence readable is by juxtaposing Nan’s internal experiences with the assumptions of those around her. In one scene, Nan and George attend an event together, and Jewett contrasts Nan’s feelings toward George with the assumptions of the other attendees: “Nan had really grown into a great liking for George Gerry. She often thought it would have been very good to have such a brother. But more than one person in the audience thought they had never seen a braver young couple; and the few elderly persons of discretion who had gone to the play

²⁷ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 163.

²⁸ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 93.

felt their hearts thrill with sudden sympathy as our friends went far down the room to their seats.”²⁹

Nan’s lack of romantic interest is made visible to the reader even as it remains invisible to the “audience” within the novel who continue to look at Nan through an amatonormative lens. In moments like these, Jewett makes the aromantic reading *for* us rather than leaving it up to the interpretation of a romantically inclined audience.

Nan’s obliviousness to romance often makes these “absences” as invisible to herself as they are to others in the novel. It is only through the collision of her inner experiences with the external assumptions others have placed on her—a collision the readers have been privy to all along—that Nan can begin to articulate her aromanticism. This occurs near the end of the novel when George Gerry makes his love for Nan more clear and Nan is forced to confront the romantic possibilities of which she has hitherto been unaware:

Nan herself was not among the first to suspect that one of her new friends had proved to be a lover; she had been turned away from such suspicions by her very nature; and when she had been forced to believe in one or two other instances that she was unwillingly drawing to herself the devotion which most women unconsciously seek, she had been made most uncomfortable, and had repelled all possibility of its further progress. She had believed herself proof against such assailment, and so indeed she had been.³⁰

We see here that Nan unconsciously avoids romance while other women “unconsciously seek” it.

Nan’s “very nature” is cited as the reason for her obliviousness in such matters, and she expresses discomfort at the idea of someone harboring romantic attraction toward her. Further, in positing “herself” as “proof against such assailment,” Nan reveals that she views her “self” as in some way oppositional to romance, presenting us with a kind of proto-aromantic identification.

²⁹ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 202.

³⁰ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 199.

Although Nan later decides that George's love for her is at least partially reciprocated, the discrepancies in how they experience this love are evident when their perspectives are placed side-by-side. In Jewett's account of George Gerry's side of this affair, several classic romantic tropes are immediately recognizable:

His heart had never before been deeply touched, but life seemed now like a heap of dry wood, which had only waited for a live coal to make it flame and leap in mysterious light, and transfigure itself from dullness into a bewildering and unaccountable glory. It was no wonder any longer that poets had sung best of love and its joys and sorrows, and that men and women, since the world began, had followed at its call. All life and its history was explained anew, yet this eager lover felt himself to be the first discoverer of the world's great secret.³¹

For George, the advent of romantic love makes him feel that his life was nothing before Nan. This is a marked contrast to Nan's experience when she determines that she loves George in return. While Nan labels her experience as "love," the haunted portrait she paints is much different from what we see in her lover's romantic inner monologues. In her narration, the "great barrier" of love is likened to "the coming of Death at her life's end."³² George, while capturing her attention like she captured his, is figured as a "ghost-like presence" rather than a light-filled, glorious one, and she is troubled rather than enlivened by the way he "would not forsake her mind."³³

Nan's macabre view of love has traditionally been read as a result of the conflict between her professional passions and the patriarchal society in which she lives, where giving in to love, for women, means giving up all other pursuits. For a woman like Nan, whose greatest aspiration is not to keep a home but to become a doctor, romantic love can therefore be imagined as a kind of death. However, while this is certainly an element of the story, it is only one piece. Nan's professional goals contribute to

³¹ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 197.

³² Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 203.

³³ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 209.

her opposition to love, but the doctor's prediction that both women *and* men who show the type of "unnatural self-reliance" Nan did as a child must "live alone and work alone" proves true.³⁴ Even moments after Nan professes that she has succumbed to love, "[t]he only desire that possessed her was to be alone again."³⁵ Whatever feelings she has for George, they pale in comparison to her desire to be by herself, and she certainly does not find bliss in love's promise, even revealing that although "[s]he liked him still," "she hated love, it was making her so miserable."³⁶

A Country Doctor has been noted for its bold stance in favor of women pursuing careers since its publication in 1884, and it is true that Nan chooses to give up the potential happiness of marriage in order to become a doctor, reflecting that this decision "would bring weariness and pain and reproach, and the loss of many things that other women held dearest and best."³⁷ Even as she notes these consequences, however, she does not falter in referring to the prospect of romance as "the hardly-desired satisfactions of love and marriage . . . toward which she had been thankful to see her friends go hand in hand, making themselves a complete happiness which nothing else could match."³⁸ While marriage for others promises "a complete happiness," marriage for Nan is "hardly-desired," and even depicted as a threat to her completeness. Her more romantically-inclined friend Eunice serves as a useful comparison here, referred to as "having been blighted because it lacked its mate, and was but half a life in itself," whereas Nan, "fearing to give half its royalty or to share its bounty, was being tempted to cripple itself, and to lose its strait and narrow way where God had left no room for another."³⁹ We

³⁴ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 92-93.

³⁵ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 203.

³⁶ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 209.

³⁷ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 205.

³⁸ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 204-5.

³⁹ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 202-3.

can see from this that the “weariness and pain and reproach” Nan anticipates will follow her decision not to marry stem not from sacrificing her chance at love but from the social repercussions of such an unconventional choice.

In 1885, a year after the publication of *A Country Doctor*, Jewett released a novel titled *A Marsh Island* which provides a more extended contrast to Nan Prince in the form of the main female character Doris Owen. Although Doris is initially characterized like Nan as being disinterested in and oblivious to romance, “so friendly and sisterly, and unlike other girls who thought of marriage”⁴⁰ and having “a complete unconsciousness of such an exciting possibility” regarding the love interest Dan Lester’s hope to marry her, Doris’s feelings eventually follow the conventional narrative arc wherein her character growth allows her to identify the correct suitor and achieve happiness by marrying him.⁴¹ Doris serves as a textbook example of how the trope of the disinterested woman typically works in literature, where her denial covers up a secret excitement or enjoyment—a trope Jewett was careful to push back against in Nan’s case—as we are told that while Doris “wished that [Dan’s] feeling might never have changed, a sense of untruthfulness made the wish a not very compelling one.”⁴²

Throughout the novel, Doris is presented time and again as a direct opposite to Nan Prince. Whereas Nan would “cripple” herself if she were to give her heart to another, “Doris Owen was a woman who would be comparatively useless in a solitary life. Hers was a nature incomplete without its mate, and incapable of reaching its possible successes alone.”⁴³ While Nan looks at a potential romantic future as akin to Death, Doris looks at a barren landscape and sees “a picture of the misery and

⁴⁰ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 48.

⁴¹ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 48.

⁴² Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 121.

⁴³ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 175.

emptiness of the girl's future, if her lover went away to sea."⁴⁴ In many ways, Doris thus serves as an ideal contrast to Nan as Jewett shows her make the opposite choice from Nan and yet uses the same metric of happiness to measure the rightness of both decisions, stating in the end that Doris is "happier as a wife than she had ever been as a maiden, and just beginning the very best of her days."⁴⁵

It is important to note that Jewett does not suddenly change her tune regarding her feminist concerns about marriage. On the contrary, Jewett dexterously balances her critique of love and marriage for women with her explicit proclamations of Doris's happily ever after relying on romantic love, creating a clear distinction between being critical of marriage and being uninterested in it and thus strengthening the case for Nan's aromantic nature.

Jewett has not been sufficiently praised for this toppling of the love hierarchy through the suggestion that romantic love is not always the ideal but rather something healing and good for some while being "crippling" for others. Nan's choice not to marry is presented as a victory in a battle against other people's expectations of her—a victory achieved by articulating her previously unconscious aversion to romance and thus making her absence of desire readable, both to herself and to others. Regardless of whether we read Nan Prince as being truly in love with George Gerry or merely pressured into something like reciprocation, the narrative is explicit in making a rejection of that proposal Nan's ticket to a happy ending. When Nan tells her aunt fearlessly, "I shall never marry. I know you think I am wrong, but there is something which always tells me I am right, and I must

⁴⁴ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 271.

⁴⁵ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 291.

follow another way,” there is no doubt in the reader’s mind that Nan has made the correct choice—that she will be happier alone than she ever would have been in a marriage.⁴⁶

The “alone” of it all is particularly remarkable given that even many aromantically resonant texts tend to substitute close friendship for romance. Although Nan has many friends throughout the novel, none of these friends are central to Nan’s happy ending. They decorate her life and the novel’s plot, but they are not at its emotional core. “Nan’s ideas of life were quite unlike those held by these new acquaintances,” Jewett writes of young Nan, “and she could not gain the least interest in most of the other children, though she grew fond of one boy who was a famous rover and fisherman, and after one of the elder girls had read a composition which fired our heroine’s imagination, she worshiped this superior being from a suitable distance.”⁴⁷ Even directly after making these pronouncements of fondness and worship, Nan does not envision herself happily living with either the boy or the elder girl. Instead, “Nan cherished an idea of going back to the farm to live by herself as soon as she grew a little older, and she indulged in pleasing day-dreams of a most charming life there, with frequent entertainments for her friends.”⁴⁸

Later in the novel, George Gerry and Eunice take up prominent platonic roles in Nan’s narrative, but neither of these friendships comes close to replacing the role of a lover. In one scene, Nan responds to the threat of being tied down with the metaphor of a damaged ship. “I wonder if the old Highflyer will ever go out again?” she says to George. “A vessel like that belongs to the high seas, and is like a prisoner when it touches shore. . . . I am always sorry for that ship.”⁴⁹ Moments before this line,

⁴⁶ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 213.

⁴⁷ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 58.

⁴⁸ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 58.

⁴⁹ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 204.

George sees something in Nan that “forbade” his affections and “made him lose all feeling of comradeship or even acquaintance.”⁵⁰ Nan’s desire for solitude and independence goes beyond a rejection of romantic possibilities to the point of warding off “even acquaintance” if it threatens her self-assertion. Even so, she is not without relationalities. Nan expresses her vision for her life as a doctor with clarity when she says, “I know better and better that most women are made for another sort of existence, but by and by I must do my part in my own way to make many homes happy instead of one.”⁵¹ While she can’t give her whole heart to George Gerry in either romantic love or friendship, “[h]er whole heart went out to this work, and she . . . was sure this was the way in which she could find most happiness.”⁵²

What Jewett accomplishes in this novel is the creation of an “aromantic type,” taking the behaviors and traits often associated with a temporary phase of development and suggesting that they might very well be constants for certain individuals. In doing so, she demands that we reckon with what it means for both our conception of romantic desire as universal and our false assumption that “unmarried” is a temporary state to be dealt with privately rather than a manifestation of a life-long aromantic orientation that requires widespread reform efforts to make aromantic life more livable.

Whether Jewett’s aim was to appeal to a wider audience by softening her critique of marriage or to represent an experience akin to what we today call aromanticism, the result is a novel that exceeds the labels that have heretofore been affixed to it. Nan’s lack of romantic attraction cannot persuasively be read as evidence of lesbian desire, nor can it be subsumed into a feminist project. Jewett depicts Nan

⁵⁰ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 204.

⁵¹ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 217.

⁵² Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 112.

in such a way that readers are forced to reckon with the discrepancies between what Nan feels (or what she does not feel) and what we assume everyone *must* feel: namely, romantic love, of an overwhelming enough type to maintain supremacy over all other relationalities and passions. Although singling Nan out may have made Jewett's political message more palatable to her contemporaries, our reluctance to take Nan's proto-aromanticism at its face value suggests that Jewett's queer message still has much to offer us even today—insights into experiences that contradict amatonormative assumptions as well as into individuals who desire alternatives to romantic love.

Chapter 2

Aromantic Narratives & Queer Time

In the previous chapter, we discussed how Sarah Orne Jewett makes aromantic absence legible in *A Country Doctor* and, in doing so, presents us with something like a proto-aromantic orientation. We turn now to Jewett's 1885 novel *A Marsh Island* and Henry James's 1905 novella "The Beast in the Jungle" to explore how the "aromantic type" queers narratives by refusing to adhere to amatonormative modes of time. In "Queer Time: The Alternative to 'Adulting,'" Sara Jaffe writes that, "Queer lives follow their own temporal logic."⁵³ Aromantic time, like queer time, is defined by "[u]ncanniness, untimeliness, belatedness, delay, and failure," with many aromantics fearing that a life without romance can consist only of missed milestones and empty waiting for an unclear future with "no destination, no roadmap."⁵⁴ Aromantics today are often stereotyped as immature, selfish, and afraid of commitment because the refusal to enter into a romantic dyad is perceived as a failure to properly "come of age" in the bildungsroman of life. In "No Shelter for Singles," Morris, Sinclair, and DePaulo recount how "Americans uncritically accept an ideology of marriage and family that glorifies marriage as the most important peer relationship, an essential key to a meaningful life, and an indication of personal maturity. Marriage is often viewed as a normative developmental milestone, one that most people generally want and expect to achieve."⁵⁵ Because romance-coded behaviors are viewed

⁵³ Sara Jaffe, "Queer Time: The Alternative to 'Adulting,'" January 10, 2018, <https://daily.jstor.org/queer-time-the-alternative-to-adulting/>.

⁵⁴ Freeman, quoted in Atalia Israeli-Nevo, "Taking (My) Time: Temporality in Transition, Queer Delays and Being (in the) Present," *Somatechnics* 7, no. 1 (2017): pp. 34-49, <https://doi.org/10.3366/soma.2017.0204>, 41; @growinguparo, 2020.

⁵⁵ Wendry L Morris, Stacey Sinclair, and Bella M DePaulo, "No Shelter for Singles: The Perceived Legitimacy of Marital Status Discrimination," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 10, no. 4 (2007): pp. 457-470, <https://doi.org/10.1177>, 458.

as important developmental goalposts, aromantic adults who do not form romantic partnerships are often viewed as less mature than their coupled peers.

Given that romantic milestones serve as markers of maturation and responsibility in the eyes of the public, it is unsurprising that this perception influences the treatment of aromantic types in literature, or that aromantic novels, especially those with happy endings, are hard to find. In the typical nineteenth-century novel featuring an unmarried protagonist, the single main character goes on a journey of self-discovery and moral development which is rewarded in the end with mutually-fulfilling romantic partnership, as seen in popular works such as E. D. E. N. Southworth's 1859 novel *The Hidden Hand* and Elizabeth Stoddard's 1862 novel *The Morgesons*.⁵⁶ A romantic happy ending is what gives the novel its meaning, serving as evidence that the events of the story have led to positive character growth. Without a romantic conclusion to give the narrative its shape, the “plot” as such begins to unravel, with the unmarried character’s arc no longer leading them toward an understood path and thus becoming untenable as proof of their development. We are left wondering if the protagonist grew or changed at all, and if they did, what that change was worth, if it has not sent them off into a romantic sunset.

The Failed Novel vs. the Failed Aromantic

While there are certainly novels that do not center romance at all, immense maneuvering is required to write an aromantic narrative that foregrounds a “visible absence” of romance without ending in a feeling of failure, tragedy, dissatisfaction, or just comeuppance. Jewett’s attempt to provide

⁵⁶ “Bachelors and Spinsters,” in Encyclopedia.com, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/bachelors-and-spinsters>.

a happy aromantic narrative in *A Country Doctor* was met with mixed reviews. In June 1884, a writer for *Literary World* said of the book, “There is not in it the material for a novel proper.”⁵⁷ A month later, an anonymous *Nation* contributor concurred, writing, “So far as the story follows the thread of her fortune, and develops her character, it might be called a novel; but plot in the ordinary sense it has none.”⁵⁸ In fairness to these critics, it is true that there is little “real” conflict in the book, with the primary focus being Nan’s expanding self-knowledge and her growing ability to communicate it. Today, we might refer to this as an aromantic “coming out” story—a narrative of aromantic articulation. In Foucaultian terms, we might even call it a transformation of aromanticism into discourse. Regardless of how we classify it, *A Country Doctor*’s negative reviews suggest Jewett’s contemporaries were unsatisfied by this effort to structure a novel around “aromantic absence” rather than a more traditional romantic plot.

Jewett tries a different approach to depicting aromanticism in narrative in *A Marsh Island*. Although structured around a romance between two young lovers, our entrypoint into the world of the marsh island is the bachelor figure Dick Dale who remains single throughout the novel. By using a conventional romantic arc as scaffolding for an aromantically resonant narrative, Jewett manages to meet expectations of what a novel should be while delving into aromantic themes. Interestingly, *A Marsh Island* received a glowing review from the same journal that expressed distaste toward *A Country Doctor*’s insufficient plot: “...Miss Jewett’s story . . . shows a marked advance in literary skill beyond *The Country Doctor*. Delightful as that book was, it was as much a collection of sketches as

⁵⁷ *Literary World* quoted in Aydelott, “Maine Stream,” 88.

⁵⁸ *Nation* quoted in Kathrine Cole Aydelott, “Maine Stream: A Bibliographic Reception Study of Sarah Orne Jewett” (University of Connecticut, 2005), <https://scholars.unh.edu/aydelott/1/>, 91.

either of her earlier volumes. The present story is one complete, harmonious picture.”⁵⁹ Given that *A Country Doctor* is otherwise a fairly typical bildungsroman novel, we would be remiss not to attribute the feeling that Jewett constructs a more “complete, harmonious picture” in *A Marsh Island* at least in part to this structuring.

The novel follows the idle artist Dick Dale as he spends a season living with the Owen family. A painter in his abundant free time, Dick Dale is drawn in by the quaintness of this rural home and its picturesque landscapes, but his aesthetic appreciation of the place also extends to his interest in the lovely daughter of the family Doris Owen. Dick and Doris become friends, with repeated hints at the possibility of them maybe becoming something more, but the true romance of the novel is between Doris and Dan Lester, a local working man who grew up with Doris’s late brother and fought with him in the war. Dick Dale, rather than being the romantic hero, emerges as a catalyst for the real romance of the novel. His journey, meanwhile, is less about romantic love than its absence—the fact that for all of his aesthetic love for the Marsh Island and for Doris, he does not belong either in this setting or in this type of romantic tale. When asked in the end by his fellow bachelor friend if he fell in love with Doris, Dick replies, “No. . . . But I wish I had, Bradish, if you want the simple truth.”⁶⁰

Dick Dale’s wish to have loved Doris anticipates the revelation at the end of Henry James’s 1903 novella “The Beast in the Jungle.” When the titular beast metaphorically strikes John Marcher, Marcher realizes his late friend May Bartram had “offered him the chance to baffle his doom” before she died: “[t]he escape would have been to love her.”⁶¹ Marcher, like Dick, can be understood as an

⁵⁹ *Nation* quoted in Aydelott, “Maine Stream,” 104.

⁶⁰ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 290.

⁶¹ Henry James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 1903, 35.

aromantic type. Using the metaphor of a beast in the jungle that will either slay or be slain by him, Marcher waits for an unknown but terrible fate he believes will one day befall him. The only person he tells of this fate is May Bartram, a woman who believes him and determines to “watch” for this fate with him. Before the beast strikes, Marcher defines his life by the ever-present threat of attack. It provides “the element of suspense” that keeps his reality from falling flat.⁶² Rather than providing him with meaning in the present, however, Marcher’s musings on the beast allow him to rest his hopes on the possibility of future meaning—not dissimilar, May Bartram notes, to the possibility of future meaning implied in the “expectation . . . of falling in love.”⁶³ For the aromantic type, however, this creates a temporally evasive relationship to meaning, where one is always waiting—waiting “[f]or the thing to happen that never does happen.”⁶⁴ When the beast finally strikes, Marcher feels the tragedy of this temporal displacement: “It was the truth, vivid and monstrous, that all the while he had waited the wait was itself his portion.”⁶⁵ He realizes that “what he presently stood there gazing at was the sounded void of his life.”⁶⁶ The final sentence of the story reveals Marcher’s surrender to the beast in a symbolic death that follows this death of meaning: “He saw the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast . . . it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, face down, on the tomb.”⁶⁷ Marcher’s terrible fate, he discovers, is his failure to love: “he had failed, with the last exactitude, of all he was to fail of.”⁶⁸ And yet, despite feeling in this moment that falling prey to the

⁶² James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 30.

⁶³ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 7.

⁶⁴ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 13.

⁶⁵ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 35.

⁶⁶ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 34.

⁶⁷ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 35.

⁶⁸ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 35.

beast is a personal failing, he also knows deep down that “[o]ne’s doom . . . was never baffled,” that escape was never truly possible.⁶⁹

The lack of reciprocal romance for both John Marcher and Dick Dale evokes regret at an opportunity (or even a life itself) “wasted,” and yet both James and Jewett cast doubt on this regret, suggesting it may be less about regretting not loving and more about regretting a world that makes ordering one’s life around anything other than romantic love *feel like* a mistake. Indeed, Dick Dale and John Marcher may be read as fools who learned too late what it would have taken to achieve their happy endings, but they might be better understood as aromantic types grappling with the way amatonormativity decenters stories constructed around aromantic time. John Marcher’s fate and doomed view of aromanticism appear to derive more from societal pressures than from aromanticism itself. Marcher’s lived reality as an aromantic type is not without meaning, but by the end of the novella, he has internalized a glorification of romantic love that leads him to view his life as a void and romantic love as the only escape.

May Bartram, on the other hand, presents a more optimistic perspective. Although we are barred from her interiority and thus cannot conclusively determine if she experiences romantic desire, she, too, does not marry, and certain lines suggest she may share Marcher’s aromanticism. When Marcher questions why she thinks his situation seems “very simple,” she replies, “It was perhaps because I seemed, as you spoke, to understand it.”⁷⁰ In spite of this, she manages to find meaning and pleasure in her deviation from the “usual human type.” When Marcher says, “I sometimes ask myself if it’s quite fair. Fair I mean to have so involved and—since one may say it—interested you. I almost feel

⁶⁹ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 35.

⁷⁰ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 6.

as if you hadn't really had time to do anything else," May replies, "Anything else but be interested? . . . Ah what else does one ever want to be?"⁷¹ Whereas Marcher's life is "voided" by his waiting, May imbues the act of waiting—of watching, of being interested—with life: "she did watch with him, and so she let this association give shape and colour to her own existence."⁷² Their "association" is not one of romantic love, and it is not marked by conventional milestones such as marriage, but May recognizes the power of what Marcher only off-handedly references: the alternative forms of meaning they make together. On her birthday, Marcher "brought her his customary offering, having known her now long enough to have established a hundred small traditions."⁷³ In her home, "every object was as familiar to him as the things of his own house and the very carpets were worn with his fitful walk . . . the place was the written history of his whole middle life."⁷⁴ There is meaning here, even if Marcher cannot see it.

This inability to view their aromantic relationality as sufficiently fulfilling and meaningful in and of itself is shared to a certain extent by Sedgwick, who reads a kind of violence into Marcher's compulsory heterosexuality. Sedgwick posits May as desiring to help Marcher embrace his sexuality and thereby open himself up to non-paranoid, non-compulsory relationships. Marcher's conclusion that he should have loved May serves as evidence that May never got what she wanted. Sedgwick's reading suggests that at the end of her life, May comes to realize that her humoring of Marcher's secret has not freed him but instead entrenched him further in paranoia. What this interpretation seems to ignore, however, is May's eager complicity in their unconventional relationship. Nick Adler remarks on this as well, pointing to May's positive affect in her final interaction with Marcher as proof:

⁷¹ James, "The Beast in the Jungle," 13.

⁷² James, "The Beast in the Jungle," 12.

⁷³ James, "The Beast in the Jungle," 13.

⁷⁴ James, "The Beast in the Jungle," 14.

“Numerous instances in May’s dialogue with Marcher reveal her acceptance and support of his fate. She smiles throughout the first part of their final interaction when Marcher initially questions her about the nature of the Beast. Unless she finds humor in his imprisonment, which is unlikely, her smile must indicate that she intends to reveal something more positive to him.”⁷⁵ This interpretation of their shared secret as something “positive” seems important to her character and her narrative function given that Marcher’s fate only becomes a tragic one when May can no longer dissuade his nihilistic view of it. When shared, his “waiting” appears in positive terms. It is only when he must bear his lack of romantic love alone, confronted in the cemetery with the normative markers of connection and meaning that he believes himself to be excluded from, that this “lack” deals a fatal blow and his life appears “void.”

Until the end, Dick Dale has an approach to life not unlike May Bartram’s, with his artistry and aesthetic desires giving his life direction and any meaning he desires supplied by being “interested.” Jewett provides us with a fairly explicit metaphor for this conception of a romantic time in *A Marsh Island* through Dick Dale’s relationship to the Owen family clock. “[I]n the old days,” Jewett writes, “the Owens’ tall clock had served as a frequent and formal excuse for the appearance of various sociable acquaintances” who would drop by to set their own clocks by it, “and once in a while somebody would still ask, with noticeable humility, for the right time, or set the hands of a cumbrous silver watch, by way of tribute, in the clock-room.”⁷⁶ This quaint detail about rural life becomes a potent symbol for normative time as we are told that, “[a] clock of such high rank must necessarily rule all timekeepers of lesser degree by the autocratic sway of its leisurely pendulum.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Adler, “The Beast Imperative,” 103.

⁷⁶ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 188..

⁷⁷ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 188..

Dick Dale, we learn from the start of the novel, does not follow any timeline but his own, and he revels at how his lack of ties leaves him able to occupy his time as he pleases. “Was not he his own master?” he thinks to himself, “And what difference would a delicious week or two here make to anybody but himself?”⁷⁸ It would be easy to dismiss these details as common characterizations for the idle rich since they are often depicted in literature as lacking responsibilities and purpose, but even among Dick’s peers, he is known for being peculiarly uninterested in the milestones that others strive to reach, suggesting his treatment of time cannot be dismissed as merely an effect of his class: “those who were growing old already among his comrades might laugh or scold at him for his apparent neglect of life’s great opportunities, but nobody could accuse him on not making the most of the days as they came.”⁷⁹ After entering into the sphere of the Owen family’s clock, however, Dick Dale attempts to comply with its “autocratic sway.” This attempt forces him to reckon with his own inner clock in a way that casts his previous relationship with time in a rueful light. He is possessed by “a sickening dislike to the aimless, silly routine of existence,” and his life, which before felt full, begins to feel wasted.⁸⁰ “What had been the use of him,” he wonders, “and what would be his fate? . . . Dick, who had always thought a great deal of what he meant to do, was forced to contemplate with great dismay the things he had not done.”⁸¹

If this were where his tale ended, we might understand this to be his great lesson: that his failure to keep pace with normative time and normative development has led to a life of emptiness and regret. A different novel might have even used this realization to motivate a love confession and a heroic

⁷⁸ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 19.

⁷⁹ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 24.

⁸⁰ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 256.

⁸¹ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 254.

act that would bring about Dick and Doris's happy matrimony. Jewett, however, casts doubt on the idea that compliance with normative time could ever bring Dick happiness. In one notable scene, Dick and Doris spend a day together in the clock-room, and rather than the time flying by in the bliss of young love, "the day seemed a week long to both Doris and the painter. As for Dick Dale, he wondered, in the course of his afternoon's entertainment, if he might not be growing gray. He was used to a social aspect of life and to good-fellowship, but they were enjoying each other that day in the clock-room until it was fairly suffocating."⁸² In another, after Doris and Dan have achieved their happy ending, Dick reflects on the weight of responsibility that has been lifted from his shoulders. Although he tells Bradish that he wishes he had loved Doris, Dick's feelings after she is no longer available suggest otherwise: "there was a certain sort of relief in finding that there was no serious decision to be made after all, and that he had been mistaken in his consciousness of an uncommon responsibility and need of action. He could not bear the thought of Doris's narrow future."⁸³ He is relieved, not heartbroken, upon discovering he has no duty to marry Doris. Far from promising fulfillment, then, normative time causes Dick's present to feel "suffocating" and the future to appear "narrow." The fact that Dick was perfectly happy with his aromantic clock until he got swept up in the Owen family's alternative view of time might allow us to reconceptualize Dick's narrative not as a failure to comply with normative time but rather a model of what happens when aromantic time is held to an ill-fitting, amatonormative standard. The relationship with time that Dick previously celebrated for its freedom, its presence, and its spontaneity becomes one of delay, failure, and waste when milestones like falling in love and marrying are valued above other measures of meaning and self-worth.

⁸² Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 99.

⁸³ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 282.

Rather than demonstrating maturation, then, we might understand Dick Dale's dissatisfaction with his life after staying with the Owen family as a result of his assimilation to an amatonormative worldview. We can view his tragedy, then, on a meta-level. Dick Dale, who loves Romantic tales with a capital "R" wishes he had loved Doris, not because it would have made him happy, but because it would have given his life a clear arc, making him the hero of his own life rather than an outsider in someone else's story, suffering from too little too late. Although Dick Dale opens the novel, he is decentered in his own narrative by his inability to love Doris. We get his words of regret, but it is Doris and Dan Lester who get the last words of the novel, their marriage securing them a happy ending.

Dick Dale, on the other hand, doesn't get an "ending" at all. One of the problems with aromantic time is the way romance is forever hovering on the horizon, making aromantic existence a permanent liminal state. Dick Dale makes this feeling clear when he tells Bradish, "I felt all the time like an accident, an ephemeral sort of existence," but the permanent liminality of aromantic types is perhaps best understood through a look at their deviant gendering.⁸⁴ Michelle Anne Abate explains that it was common for unmarried female protagonists to be celebrated for displaying tomboyishness in their youth as long as this gender deviance eventually gives way to more feminine traits, and Sedgwick likewise points to the effeminacy of the bachelor figure who is expected to become a traditional patriarch at the end of his character arc. In both cases, gender deviance is presumed to be temporary. Through these narrative tropes, a developmental pattern emerges wherein the ascension to proper man- or womanhood is intricately linked with the fulfillment of romantic desires. Proper gendering and success in romance are thus mutually constitutive in the typical nineteenth-century

⁸⁴ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 290.

narrative, creating problems for the “aromantic type” who, by refusing romance, fails to grow out of their insufficient gendering. Dick Dale is a perfect example of this phenomenon. Although he casts himself as a knight in shining armor, his efforts to play out this role always backfire in a way that reveals him instead to be the damsel in distress. In one humorous scene, Dale attempts to “rescue” Doris from her horses and ends up injuring himself and needing Doris to come to his rescue.⁸⁵ Whereas the romantic hero might overcome these initial emasculating setbacks and prove his manhood to win his love, casting his effeminacy into the naive past of youth, Dick Dale’s failure to love Doris means his queer gender is not temporally-bounded but lasting. When he finally leaves the marsh island, Mrs. Owen remarks, “There, it always seemed more like having a girl about than a man,” reasserting his perceived femininity at the end of the novel.⁸⁶ The line, “I expect he’ll be a great man one of these days,” suggests that manhood is not something he has but something he can hope to achieve in the imagined future. From this, we can understand Dick Dale’s gender as being rooted in a queer time limbo wherein “manhood” is forever on the horizon yet unattainable.⁸⁷ The fact that Dick does not wish that Doris loved *him* or that she had married him instead of Dan raises the possibility that what Dick Dale is really wishing for is not to *be* in love with Doris but to *have been* in love with her—a wish to have already loved and thus escape the liminality of waiting, or the related liminality of insufficient gendering.

We can turn again to James’s “The Beast in the Jungle” to understand the impact of this distinction. In an early discussion about Marcher’s ambiguous fate, May Bartram asks, “Isn’t what you

⁸⁵ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 68.

⁸⁶ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 285.

⁸⁷ Jewett, *A Marsh Island*, 285.

describe perhaps but the expectation—or at any rate the sense of danger, familiar to so many people—of falling in love?,” to which Marcher replies, “Of course what’s in store for me may be no more than that. The only thing is . . . that I think if it had been that I should by this time know.’ ‘Do you mean because you’ve been in love . . . and it hasn’t meant such a cataclysm, hasn’t proved the great affair?’ ‘Here I am, you see. It hasn’t been overwhelming.’”⁸⁸ Although Marcher confirms that he has been in love in the past, it has not been “overwhelming.” It has not supplied the meaning he craves, allowing him to state with confidence that his passions lie elsewhere and that his future will be built on something else. Dick Dale, on the other hand, cannot discount romantic love as a path to happiness because he has not experienced it. It remains theoretically desirable and as long as it remains un-experienced, and Dick, resultingly, remains delayed and waiting, his life failed and wasted. The inability to foreclose the possibility of future romance without having had romance in the past is another element of the “delay” associated with aromantic time, trapping us in a limbo where we must wait for romance to present itself so we can either accept or reject it. Until then, we can feel as though we are stuck in a fraught relationship with meaning, late to the milestones that matter and cast as “failed” in the meantime.

In many ways, then, *A Country Doctor* is an ideal case, treating aromantic refusal as the climax of the story which is then followed by a happy ending. It is vital that Nan has the opportunity to entertain love and marriage with someone suitable and then reject it, as otherwise, she would remain in the limbo of the tentative “unless.” In loving George Gerry but finding only misery in the experience, Nan can confidently go forth into her aromantic future, no longer held in the normative timeline’s

⁸⁸ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 7.

purgatory of waiting for “Mr. Right.” For Dick Dale, then, the wish to *have loved* Doris may be no more than a wish to reclaim his timeline by putting an end to the incessant waiting—an active choice that would allow him to define his own present and move forward into his aromantic future without doubt. This is what Nan Prince does in *A Country Doctor*, and it is what earns her a happy ending. However, by veering from the temporal logic of amatonormativity, Nan’s aromantic success becomes the novel’s narrative failure. We might attribute the positive reviews of *A Marsh Island* to the central romance, but we might just as easily attribute them to the regret of Dick Dale—the punishing of “untimeliness . . . delay, and failure” that novel readers have come to expect.

Chapter 3

Aromantic Refusals: Restless, Wayward, and Disorient(ed/ing)

In 1894, Kate Chopin published a story titled “The Story of an Hour” that dives into the interiority of the newly widowed Louise Mallard as she processes her husband’s death. Louise’s sister Josephine and her husband’s friend Richard are careful to break the news gently as Louise is “afflicted with a heart trouble,” and upon hearing it, Louise retreats to her room and grieves “at once, with sudden, wild abandonment.”⁸⁹ After her tears have dried, however, a new emotion takes hold. Although Louise reflects that “she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not,” this thought is swiftly followed by a revelation: “What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!”⁹⁰ Louise marches out of her bedroom and down the stairs to begin her new life, but before she can act on this aromantic freedom, her husband walks through the door, very much alive, and Louise dies. “When the doctors came,” Chopin writes, “they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.”⁹¹

Chopin subverts amatonormative expectations by proposing that a future without love can be an attractive one rather than a fate to be dreaded. Louise Mallard has experienced love and determined that it pales in comparison to the freedoms of widowhood. Her death, however, means that this future remains imaginary. The prospect of aromantic happiness teases us, tantalizing in its liberating

⁸⁹ Kate Chopin, “The Story of an Hour,” 1894.

⁹⁰ Chopin, “The Story of an Hour.”

⁹¹ Chopin, “The Story of an Hour.”

euphoria, but it does not deliver, slipping just beyond the open window and out of reach. We cannot see what shape it takes, or where this aromantic turn might lead.

This darkly humorous story provides a useful entry point into the focus of this chapter: the question of what aromanticism orients *toward* in orienting away from romance. In the previous chapters, we have touched on various metaphors for this ambiguous “orienting toward,” from John Marcher’s anticipation of an impending beast attack to Nan Prince’s “longing for The Great Something Else.”⁹² But while James eventually reveals Marcher’s fate and Jewett is quite clear about Nan Prince’s great calling, Louise Mallard’s orientation is less clear, and the vast differences between each of these characters’ orientations suggest that there may be a problem with the question.

Re-orientation, Not Substitution

The desire to pinpoint what aromanticism orients *toward* reveals an internalized amatonormative logic which places romantic love on a pedestal and then demands that aromantics justify their choice of substitution. To truly engage with aromantic theory, however, we must ask ourselves if “substitution” is the right framework for thinking about aromantic orientation, or if this line of thought is merely a result of the cultural supremacy of romantic love and the suspicions this supremacy creates regarding aromanticism.

Perhaps the most prevalent suspicion expressed toward aromantics is that of anti-sociality, or the idea that in turning away from romance, we are turning inward and thus closing ourselves off from the world. These concerns are raised in *A Country Doctor* in relation to the seemingly anti-social

⁹² Sarah Orne Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, Penguin Classics (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 115.

qualities of a young Nan Prince who “could not gain the least interest in most of the other children,” but they turn out to be unfounded in the end when Nan chooses to devote her life to the care of her community.⁹³ In “The Beast in the Jungle,” John Marcher is similarly preoccupied with allaying concerns about his own selfishness or anti-sociality, but his anxieties prove harder to dismiss. In a dialogue about what it means for May and himself to appear “humanly,” Marcher defines it “as showing that you’re living for something.”⁹⁴ In “living for,” Marcher refers to a grand meaning or purpose, but May teasingly points out that “living for” also calls upon the selfless ideals attached to romantic love. Her association with the usual human type relies upon the outward appearance of “living for” Marcher the way a romantic partner might do. In this doubling, we see how the aromantic type, in not “living for” another person, is cast, not only as not “humanly,” but as both selfish and without meaning or purpose. Throughout the novella, we are shown proof of Marcher being unequivocally social: “caring for . . . the people in London whose invitations he accepted and repaid” and giving gifts to May Bartram on her birthday.⁹⁵ Despite this, Marcher engages in numerous internal monologues on selfishness: “He had kept up, he felt, and very decently on the whole, his consciousness of the importance of not being selfish, and it was true that he had never sinned in that direction without promptly enough trying to press the scales the other way.”⁹⁶ He seems to be constantly striving to make up for some perceived deficiency of sociality, referring to the birthday gifts for May as “one of his proofs to himself . . . that he hadn’t sunk into real selfishness.”⁹⁷ No matter how often he “press[es]

⁹³ Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, 58.

⁹⁴ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 17.

⁹⁵ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 12.

⁹⁶ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 16.

⁹⁷ James, “The Beast in the Jungle,” 13.

the scales the other way,” since he is not “living for” a romantic partner, Marcher cannot shake these suspicions of anti-sociality.

Like Nan, John Marcher is quite involved in his community, even outside of his deep friendship with May Bartram, revealing that the larger problem is not with any inherent selfishness but rather what such concerns reveal about how we view romantic love. The idea that aromanticism must offer an alternative love object to compensate for a lack of romantic interest reveals just how deeply romance influences our discourse on desire. In Sedgwick’s “The Beast in the Closet,” for example, she writes that Marcher, in his failure to love May Bartram, “simply fails to desire at all,” illustrating how “desire” is often monopolized by romantic love within our discourse.⁹⁸ We might benefit then from shifting the conversation away from aromanticism’s perceived deficiencies and how it might make up for them and instead place romance itself under the microscope, unpacking the ways in which romantic love structures desire to benefit patriarchy and racial capitalism by orienting our attention to the private sphere even when the problems we are grappling with are a matter of the public.

Tumblr users yingchen and yingtong analyze these mechanisms in their 2018 zine titled “an aromantic manifesto” which opens with the intentionally inflammatory claim, “romance is inherently queerphobic.”⁹⁹ Citing both survey data and queer theorists like Munoz, they make the case that romance is an artificial ideal that further others marginalized peoples while promising an easy, personal solution to any felt unhappiness. In light of D’Emilio’s assertion that the rise of capitalism was coupled with a glorification of romantic love as a source of comfort and security in an increasingly alienating world, this conception of romance as an insufficient salve for systemic failures and injustices becomes

⁹⁸ Sedgwick, “The Beast in the Closet,” 195.

⁹⁹ yingchen and yingtong, “An Aromantic Manifesto,” 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/aromanticmanifesto>, 3.

understandable. When care and financial security are expected to be provided by one's romantic partner, the political discourse can shift away from large-scale socioeconomic reform toward the personal—the issue of finding a “compatible” partner who can provide you with what you need.

Aromantics reveal the problems this shift of public issues to the realm of the personal can create. Without a romantic partner to provide either emotional or material security, aromantics often rely on community for care and sociality. “[T]he point of aromanticism,” yingchen and yingtong's aromantic manifesto reads, “is that it cannot be done alone.”¹⁰⁰ The widespread privileging of romantic dyads and nuclear families over care for the wider community, however, means that those who are coupled often prioritize their romantic dyad or family unit over the unattached aromantics in their lives. It is thus unsurprising that aromantic stories often end on a negative note, expressing either regret at a character's lack of romantic love or anxiety at the possibility of never finding an appropriate substitute. Those that do end on a more positive note often direct themselves anxiously but hopefully toward an amorphous future.

Aromantic Refusal as Orienting Toward Hope

It is to this anxious hope that we turn our attention now, using Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's 1884 short story “A Moral Exigency” as a case study on the affective complexities of this orientation. The story follows Eunice, a poor minister's daughter who—at twenty-five years old—is on the threshold of old maid-hood. Believing herself to be excluded from the prospect of romantic rescue as a

¹⁰⁰ yingchen and yingtong, “an aromantic manifesto,” 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/aromanticmanifesto>, 14.

result of her “homeliness,” she regards her lot in life “with a sort of resigned disapproval.”¹⁰¹ When a widower asks for her hand in marriage, however, she employs a Bartlebian refusal, stating, “I think I would rather remain as I am.”¹⁰² This simple rejection boldly challenges amatonormative assumptions since, “within cis-heteronormative society, romance is publicly constructed as a private cure to any deep unhappiness we may feel.”¹⁰³ Eunice acknowledges her deep dissatisfaction with her current life, but she recognizes that marriage to a widower with four children would not offer relief from the unpaid labor she performs as a minister’s daughter. Rather, it would mean a substitution of a different form of unpaid labor. “Six years ago,” Freeman writes of the widower, “when he married, he had been romantic. He would never be again. He was not thirsting for love and communion with a kindred spirit now, but for a good, capable woman who would take care of his four clamorous children without a salary.”¹⁰⁴ Through Eunice’s vocal refusal, Freeman thus sheds light on the way marriage often functions as an inadequate replacement for public support. When Eunice points out to her father that she will hardly be better off in this marriage than in her current state, her father encourages the match anyway: “you will forgive me if I speak plainly, my dear. You — are getting older; you have not had any other visitors. You would be well provided for in this way —”¹⁰⁵ Despite the labor she performs for her family and community, Eunice is framed here as an undue responsibility for her family by remaining in the role of “daughter” instead of “wife.” She curiously parallels the widower’s children by being cast as a burden that can only be lessened if she accepts the widower’s marriage proposal.

¹⁰¹ Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, “A Moral Exigency,” 1884, <http://wilkinsfreeman.info/Short/MoralExigencyE.htm>.

¹⁰² Wilkins Freeman, “A Moral Exigency.”

¹⁰³ yingchen and yingtong, “An Aromantic Manifesto,” 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/aromanticmanifesto>, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Wilkins Freeman, “A Moral Exigency.”

¹⁰⁵ Wilkins Freeman, “A Moral Exigency.”

Soon, a different, more exciting suitor piques Eunice's interest: "[H]e had seemed almost as much out of her life as a lover in a book. Young men of his kind were unknown quantities heretofore to this steady, homely young woman. They seemed to belong to other girls."¹⁰⁶ The people in Eunice's life quickly express their opinion that men like these do in fact belong to other girls, no longer positing that marriage is always an objectively good choice. Whereas the widower was viewed as a realistic match, this new suitor is widely believed to be out of Eunice's league. His affections waver between Eunice and the younger, more attractive, wealthier Ada, and rather than praising Eunice for attracting a higher status man, the community treats Eunice as a villain for seducing the man away from a more fitting match, revealing how the myth of romantic love's ability to transcend the material is just a cover for the machinations of property and inheritance. Eunice ignores their opinions at first, pleased with this new suitor's affections, but when Ada herself appeals to her, Eunice resolves to cede her claim. She can dismiss the judgments of others as mere jealousy at her unexpected good fortune since they all believed her unmarriageable except by last resort, but Ada's begging reveals the way this system of romantic competition pits women against each other, and this consequence is one Eunice cannot stomach. Morally repulsed by the divisive realities of this toxic hierarchy, Eunice decides to remove herself from it. In the end, she literally delivers their suitor to Ada's door.

Although this is certainly a noble deed, it is not rewarded with a happy ending for Eunice. Neither is it met with a return of the same "resigned" outlook toward life that Eunice had at the beginning of the story. Eunice gives up her suitor and her chance at romantic love and marriage, yes, but her momentary elevation within the desirability hierarchy wakes her up to her own desires, and she

¹⁰⁶ Wilkins Freeman, "A Moral Exigency."

does not give these up so easily. Her refusal of the widower came from a place of resignation at the state of things, but this second refusal is rooted in hope. The last line of the story is a plea to Ada, the ambiguity of which holds the key to understanding the complex orientation of aromantic refusals:

“‘Love me all you can, Ada,’ she said. ‘I want — something.’”¹⁰⁷

Restlessness

In “Hope as Refusal,” Rachel Silverbloom draws from a range of influential Black feminist scholars and queer theorists like Saidiya Hartman, Audre Lorde, and José Esteban Muñoz to build a critique of Lee Edelman’s pessimistic take on queer refusals and propose a theory that troubles the divide between complacent hopefulness and the equally unproductive hopelessness. “What I am calling ‘hope as refusal,’” Silverbloom writes, “is a political affect where ‘hopelessness and hope converge’ in order to reject the conditions of livability in the present and strive toward experimental forms of living at the same time that we might anticipate (or expect) failure.”¹⁰⁸ This formulation is incredibly useful for thinking through aromantic refusals as they reject the hope that romantic love will save us from unhappiness, alienation, poverty, etc., in a way that expresses a hope for a “utopian otherwise,” a desire for “*something*” not yet named. In this way, aromanticism refuses the complacent faith in romantic love to mitigate societal deficiencies that should instead be met with collective action.

Refusing complacency also presents a risk, however, as choosing not to “settle down” also means rejecting the limited consolation that romantic love and legally bound relationships are expected to provide. Given this risk, it is unsurprising that the ends of aromantic narratives are seldom “happy.”

¹⁰⁷ Wilkins Freeman, “A Moral Exigency.”

¹⁰⁸ Silverbloom, “Hope as Refusal,” 809.

Rather, they tend to be “anxious,” “doubting,” “mournful,” “uncertain,” or even “desperate.” We might understand them even as painfully “*desiring*,” once we have delinked “desire” from romance. Aromantic refusals mean accepting risk in the hope that something else, as yet unnamed—or even unimagined—is possible. Returning to Jewett, we might treat Nan’s stated aim to care for multiple homes instead of one as an attempt at articulating Nan’s “hope as refusal” in terms that feel possible. Before her efforts at legibility translate her desires into domestic and productive terms, Nan’s orientation is described more ambiguously as “a restless, impatient, miserable sort of longing for The Great Something Else.”¹⁰⁹

But if aromantic refusals are a leap of faith from the solid ground of the unacceptable present toward an amorphous “Great Something Else,” then what emerges in the interim? What is aromantic life between the refused present and the hoped-for future? Building on Silverbloom’s “hope as refusal” and Lorde’s recuperation of anger as hopeful and not just destructive, I propose that aromantic refusals are an embrace of “restlessness”—the affect of the anxious yet hopeful, the dissatisfied yet persevering and never-complacent, the desiring yet unoriented. The term “restlessness” aptly combines several important elements of aromantic refusal: a rejection of the present, a drive toward an as-yet-inaccessible future, a perpetual untimeliness cast somewhere between waiting and wasted, a refusal to “settle” or “settle down,” and a constant movement “away from” but not always clearly “toward.”

To see how this “restlessness” manifests in literature, we can look to Jewett’s most famous work *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. If *A Country Doctor* felt to some reviewers like a collection of short

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Orne Jewett, *A Country Doctor*, Penguin Classics (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 115.

stories more than a novel, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is even more vignette-like in structure, following its unnamed narrator as she interacts with a collection of residents in a quaint coastal town where she is renting a room while she finishes writing her book. There is an implied aromantic refusal preceding the narrator's wandering life, but we are given little insight into what experiences may have led her to this point. In fact, we are given very little information about the narrator at all. Most of what we know of her is gained by inference from looking at which townsfolk's stories interest her enough for her to record them. The repeated themes in these tales of loneliness, heartbreak, and solitude suggest a romance failed, lost, or left behind somewhere in the narrator's past, but the event or relationship itself is never described.

In some ways, this peculiar lens is a bold counter to suspicions of aromanticism orienting inward as the unnamed narrator is the very opposite of self-absorbed. However, by reshaping the world around her interests and narrating only the stories that echo her own feelings, the narrator appears in other ways no less biased than John Marcher—simply more discreet about her absorption in the mysterious secret that orients her life. Just as May and Marcher are brought together by May “be[ing] interested,” the unnamed narrator of *Pointed Firs* creates connection and meaning through her strangely empty lens, and we come to know her only by way of her connection with others—by the way the “outsider” in her calls to the “outsider” in those she meets. Each vignette and interaction is at once mundane yet meaningful, precarious yet comforting, mournful yet joyous, and lonely yet resonating with connection. Within this small community of outsiders, there is a sense of deep sadness and isolation that undergirds the past and present. And yet, there is a more positive affect there, too, in the characters' constant connection and movement—a restless desire for Eunice's “*something*.” That

“something” is just as unclear as the past that produced the Jewett’s unnamed character, but from this restless, ambiguous mingling of hope and anxiety, refusal and desire, there emerges what Silverbloom refers to as “an inextricable intimacy born of an intolerable present, an uncertain future, and the will to survive, form communities of care, and create beauty, in spite of it all.”¹¹⁰ Hermits, outsiders, and wanderers—solitary types, all—and yet each orienting toward “*something*” together.

¹¹⁰ Silverbloom, “Hope as Refusal,” 824.

Afterword

The primary problem I hoped to address in this thesis is the lack of critical attention to aromanticism. I was tired of reading queer theory that presumed an alloromantic subject and frustrated by the way the “absence as evidence” framework seemed to mirror the erasure and misrecognition aromantics experience today.

The challenge of doing this kind of project is one that frequently plagues scholars: the struggle of defining without being exclusionary. This is especially difficult when working with a contemporary term that many people today identify with, but it feels more daunting when there is so little out there to offer contrasting points of view. The aromantic community is vast and varied, and I knew with certainty that no matter how I defined aromanticism or translated it into a literary lens, it would be insufficient and incomplete.

In reading yingchen and yingtong’s aromantic manifesto and specifically, the inflammatory claim that opens it—that “romance is inherently queerphobic”), I recognized that while a perfect delineation of aromantic theory is impossible, it is also unnecessary for sparking the conversation I wanted to start. The absence I felt in queer scholarship did not stem from a failure of accurate definitions but from a lack of any attempt at articulation at all.

While I would love to believe my theorizing here has produced a flawless aromantic literary lens, I am confident there are errors I have missed, and it is my sincerest hope that other scholars and aromantics find something in my analysis to trouble, to build from, to poke at until it yields something new.

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