

'I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where women are represented as friends... But almost without exception they are shown in their relationship to men.'

To what extent are fictitious friendships reliant on the opposite sex?

Woolf's statement, made in 1929 looks very different ninety years on. A quick google search of the phrase 'books about friendship' brings up almost exclusively novels about friendships between women. It can no longer be argued women are shown 'almost without exception (...) in their relationship to men.'¹ A belief in the representation of women as three-dimensional people, with lives and interests outside and in addition to men, children and family has permeated the public consciousness, from the Bechdel Test to modern feminism.

Woolf states that 'books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately'². Whilst the characteristics of female friendships have changed over time, strong fictitious friendships have slowly become engrained in society.

Wuthering Heights was published in 1847, at the dawn of the modern feminist movement. Woolf states that 'woman becomes much more various and complicated'³ in nineteenth century literature, yet friendships between women are almost entirely absent in the novel. Catherine has no female friends, and neither does her daughter. Catherine Earnshaw's powerful friendship with Heathcliff, whilst deeply fulfilling cannot replace the healing emotional support provided by a close female friendship. She has no one in her world who can truly understand what it is like to be her.

This lack of understanding is seen in Heathcliff's response to Catherine stating 'It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now'⁴. In a world where she is entirely dependent on men, Catherine knows she could not live safely in a relationship with Heathcliff, pointing out 'If Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars'⁵ Heathcliff's position as a man in Victorian society, independent and able to earn his own money renders him incapable of understanding this. Instead, Catherine's closest friend abandons her, and on her deathbed blames her for her actions '*Why* did you despise me? *Why* did you abandon your own heart, Cathy?'⁶ Both the italicisation of 'why' and the repeated rhetorical questions show Heathcliff's inability to understand Catherine's choices. The sheer venom present in the verbs "despise" and "abandon" further emphasises his inability to empathise with Catherine.

Her only female confidante is Nelly, a woman of a different age and class, also incapable of truly understanding what it is like to live as Catherine Earnshaw 'If I can make any sense of your nonsense, Miss,' I said, 'it only goes to convince me that you are ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying; or that you are a wicked, unprincipled girl.'⁷ Perhaps it is this lack of female companionship that truly drives Catherine to madness. "Oh, I will die,' she exclaimed, 'since no one cares anything about me.'⁸

Describing Catherine as 'mad' presents issues in itself. Caroline Zilboorg states that "Madness" has often been used to dismiss or trivialise woman writers'⁹ and Arwa Mahdawi

¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. pg. 82

² Ibid. pg. 79

³ Ibid. pg. 82

⁴ Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*. pg. 57

⁵ Ibid. pg. 58

⁶ Ibid. pg. 117

⁷ Ibid. pg. 59

⁸ Ibid. pg. 87

⁹ Caroline Zilboorg, *Women's Writing: Past and Present*. pg. 74

states that ‘The “crazy woman”¹⁰ has become a kneejerk way to put women in their place and remind them that, no matter what they achieve, they are inherently flawed.’ The isolation of Catherine is what has caused her friendlessness. Rather than being ‘mad’, Catherine is perhaps experiencing the painful effects of a lack of friendship.

In Thomas Hardy’s *The Withered Arm* we see a portrayal of a female friendship, written from the view of a man. Woolf states that ‘It remains obvious... that a man is terribly hampered and partial in his knowledge of woman, as a woman in her knowledge of men.’¹¹ As such it could be expected that Hardy’s story would be a classic example of women being shown only in relation to the opposite sex. But instead, Rhoda and Gertrude’s first meeting is driven by Gertrude’s kindness; we discover that Gertrude simply wants to help Rhoda ‘I’ll come and bring you better boots, and see your mother’¹². It cannot be ignored, however that much of their friendship builds on Gertrude’s desire for a cure, with Gertrude confiding in Rhoda her worry about the arm ‘If I hadn’t a notion that it makes my husband dislike me- no, love me less’¹³ and Rhoda accompanying her on her visit to Conjuror Trendle. Strikingly, on the journey to visit Trendle it is stated that ‘they hardly spoke to each other.’¹⁴ This feeling of awkwardness between the women gives the sense that they have little in common, and that the relationship is more practical than emotional. So, essentially whilst Rhoda and Gertrude’s friendship is initially independent of men, when their friendship becomes more dependent on Gertrude’s desire for a cure to please her husband (changing into a friendship reliant on the opposite sex) it begins to sour.

In Hardy’s characterisation of Rhoda- primarily her attitude to Gertrude- there is some evidence of ‘man being hampered and partial in his knowledge of women’¹⁵, in what could be considered an unrealistic portrayal of the nuances of friendships between women. This is seen in chapter IV, where Rhoda at first responds to Gertrude positively ‘her feeling for the young wife amounted well- nigh to affection’¹⁶, yet later in the chapter it is stated that ‘In her secret heart Rhoda did not altogether object to slight diminution to her successor’s beauty.’¹⁷ These juxtaposing attitudes suggest an inability to understand what Woolf so bluntly states; ‘Sometimes women do like women.’¹⁸

Sometimes, fictitious friendships between women are not only platonic but sexual. Virginia Woolf’s comment that ‘almost without exception they [women] are shown in their relationship to men.’¹⁹ is preceded by a thinly veiled allusion to lesbianism, something Woolf herself had experience with- her affair with Vita Sackville- West being the most well- known:

‘I am sorry to break off so abruptly. Are there no men present? Do you promise me that behind that red curtain over there the figure of Sir Charles Biron is not concealed? We are all women you assure me? Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were these- ‘Chloe liked Olivia...’ Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.’²⁰

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/commentisfree/2016/aug/07/term-crazy-shouldnt-be-thrown-around-lightly-ask-any-woman>

¹¹ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*. pg. 82

¹² Hardy, *The Withered Arm*. pg. 14

¹³ *Ibid.* pg. 17

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 21

¹⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* pg. 82

¹⁶ Hardy, *The Withered Arm* pg. 17

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pg. 18

¹⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* pg. 81

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 82

²⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 81

A vital example of this combination of the platonic and sexual would be “The Color Purple” by Alice Walker. Celie’s relationship with Shug is not easily defined - it is motherly or sisterly at times ‘I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia- or like she mama’²¹, at others deeply romantic and sexual ‘She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth.’²² Instead, their relationship is all encompassing. To Celie, Shug is her friend, lover and advocate. This is a female friendship without the boundaries of convention.

Woolf states that ‘a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction’²³. Celie’s relationship with Shug provides her with independence when she gathers the courage to leave her husband and move in with Shug, as well her own income ‘I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet.’²⁴ Whilst Celie is not writing fiction as such, the independence provided by her new life allows her to experience true happiness. ‘Dear Nettie, I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time.’²⁵

However, to state that fictitious friendships in ‘The Color Purple’ are entirely independent from the opposite sex would be inaccurate. Whilst men cause Celie a huge amount of pain in her life, from her abusive husband and stepfather to Shug’s husband and affairs with other men; it is significant that she makes peace with these men in the conclusion of the novel. ‘After all the evil he done I know you wonder why I don’t hate him. I don’t hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug. And two, Shug use to love him.’²⁶ ‘If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content.’²⁷ This retribution makes sense from a Womanist perspective, an offshoot of feminism for black feminists first defined by Walker. Regarding men, Walker states a Womanist ‘Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.’²⁸ A further clarification of this belief can be found in the Combahee River Collective Statement, made by a group of Black feminists, in the section ‘What We Believe’, particularly the line ‘Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand.’²⁹

In essence, Walker portrays friendships between women as essential and rejuvenating. In independence from the opposite sex they can be free and happy. However, she also shows friendships between men and woman as a vital part of life as well.

Perhaps a suggestion of the future of female friendships in fiction is to be found in modern young adult literature. Young adult fiction is vital in showing young people what they are capable of. If young people see depth in fictitious friendships between women, perhaps those that end up as authors will subconsciously find themselves including them in their works, seeing them as a part of everyday life. Woolf states that ‘literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut on women.’³⁰ In this way, more of this disparity could be levelled out over time.

Strong female friendships are often seen in the Throne of Glass series by Sarah J. Maas. She is an author who clearly believes in the representation of women, stating ‘back then novels

²¹ Walker, *The Color Purple*. pg. 57

²² Ibid. pg. 109

²³ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* pg. 6

²⁴ Walker, *The Color Purple* pg. 190

²⁵ Ibid. pg. 193

²⁶ Ibid. pg. 230

²⁷ Ibid. pg. 247

²⁸ Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*

²⁹ <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>

³⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*. pg. 83

that had young ladies saving the day were few and far between, and I wanted to read more stories about young women kicking ass.’³¹

The relationship between Celaena Sardothien and Nehemia Ytger in the first novel of the series has many aspects of this modern female friendship.

Their friendship is clearly independent of the opposite sex, with its focus being on the pleasure of being with another likeminded individual ‘She’d managed to see Nehemia a fair amount over the past two weeks- mostly just for brief walks and dinners, where they discussed what it was like for Nehemia to grow up in Eyllwe, what she thought of Rifthold, and who at court had managed to annoy the princess. Which to Celaena’s delight, was usually everyone.’³² The effect of this strong female friendship gives Celaena emotional support in a world that seems so strongly against her. ‘It has been a while since someone had looked out for her, and Celaena had the feeling she could get used to it.’³³

This modern female friendship is emphasised by the fact that rather than being reliant on the opposite sex, the two women support each other in times of danger. In the climax of the novel Nehemia saves Celaena’s life “I won’t waste time dancing around the truth,” Nehemia said. “I saved your life at the duel.”³⁴ But as well as danger, they support each other through emotional pain. Celaena is there for Nehemia through her grief after the killing of many of her people ‘Unable to say anything, the assassin simply held her- for as long as it took for the pain to ease.’³⁵

Woolf impresses on the importance of showing female friendship in all of its complexity in the statement ‘For if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been.’³⁶ Celaena and Nehemia’s friendship shows that Maas’s writing has lit this torch, which will be there to lead the way for future generations of writers and readers.

Woolf’s statement ‘I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where women are represented as friends... But almost without exception they are shown in their relationship to men.’³⁷ simply cannot be seen as accurate any longer. Friendships between women, although their characteristics have changed over time, seem to have found their place, and it is clear this place is no longer one entirely reliant on the opposite sex. The opposite sex have a place and an importance in women’s lives, but what remains clear is that friendships between women are vital. They function as a support network and a place of solace. Ironically, for a strong female protagonist to exist, strong female friendships are vital.

Word count: 2384

³¹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/just-because-you-have-great-hair-doesn-t-mean-you-can-t-kick-ass-1.2847042>

³² Maas, *Throne of Glass* pg. 167

³³ *Ibid.* pg. 203

³⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 377

³⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 252

³⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* pg. 83, 84

³⁷ *Ibid.* pg. 82

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