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

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

From the works of Shakespeare to that of Dickens and Wilde, it seems that men are able to possess developed and purposeful relationships among themselves where, in the words of Woolf, “All these relationships between women... are too simple.”¹ As the Master Narrative dominates the literary canon, women are labelled as “a decorative sex”² from early medieval literature to that of the 19th and even the 20th century. As a result, we are not only deprived of friendships between women; we learn only of women confined to the roles of daughter or wife. But in our culture today, the restrictions of patriarchal responsibilities no longer dictate the lives of women the way that Woolf writes about³. With both men and women free to learn and write, we are beginning to overcome the reliance of fictitious women on men.

In almost all of the works of Shakespeare, friendship is indispensable for character development, comedy and the evolution of the narrative. If men were portrayed only in their relation to women, one would be left with plays void of character. According to Woolf, “We might perhaps have most of Othello; a good deal of Antony; but no Caesar, no Brutus, no Hamlet, no Lear, no Jaques”⁴. In ‘Romeo and Juliet’, the friendships of Romeo form much of the comedy and narrative, where Juliet’s only ‘friendship’ is her nurse. Mercutio’s interaction with Romeo not only gives the play its comedic element but is also an integral element in the development of the plot; for instance, the “plague”⁵ he speaks over the Montagues and the Capulets that foreshadows the play’s tragic conclusion. In contrast, Juliet’s relationship with the nurse remains built on maternal love rather than the balanced admiration of friends.

Similarly, the importance of Horatio’s friendship with Hamlet is made clear in his final dying words, in which the prince trusts his friend to “tell [his] story”⁶. If one is to juxtapose this with the role of female friendship in Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’, the stark contrast is evident. Of the two women in the play, both Ophelia and Gertrude are clearly confined by the patriarchal society in which they lived. In an examination of the character of Ophelia, Tynelle Ann Olivas addresses the predominate perception of Ophelia as “an objectified female with very little purpose other than to support Hamlet’s role as protagonist”.² There

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¹ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, p.100
² Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Grey, 1890, p44
³ “Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves.” Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, p131
⁴ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, p101
⁵ “A plague o’both your houses!” Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, Act 3 scene 1 line 102
⁶ “draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story” Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 5 scene 2 line 361-362
⁷ Tynelle Ann Olivas, Who is Ophelia? An examination of the Objectification and Subjectivity of Shakespeare’s Ophelia
does seem to be some connection between the women; Gertrude expresses genuine sorrow at the death of Ophelia\(^8\). However, this came about only through their separate links to Hamlet. In their first interaction, Gertrude wishes for Ophelia that her “good beauties be the happy cause of Hamlet’s wildness”\(^9\), illustrating how their relationship is centred around their love for the prince. Heather Brown comments on how “Woolf’s modern reading of history allows the reader to interpret Shakespeare’s Ophelia... as a source of sympathy for her loss of identity after the removal of male dominance.”\(^10\) Evidently, where Horatio can be defined by his friendship with Hamlet, Ophelia’s character cannot be reliant on a friendship with Gertrude; it must rest solely on her relationship with Hamlet.

This asymmetrical presentation of male and female friendship is in no way exclusive to the Elizabethan period, nor is it solely a trait of British literature. Twentieth century American writing, though in many ways progressive, parallels that of Shakespeare in some respects, namely the presentation of female characters. The talent of F. Scott Fitzgerald exhibited by ‘The Great Gatsby’ was described by fellow author Hemingway as being “as natural as the pattern that was made by the dust on a butterfly’s wings”\(^11\). However true this may be, it is difficult to ignore the absence of female character development, let alone female friendships. Gatsby’s ‘femme fatale’ Daisy is presented almost exclusively in her relationship to Tom, Nick and Gatsby. One could argue that her relationship with Jordan contradicts this rule, though the lack of interaction between them would suggest otherwise. In our first glimpse of the ‘friends’, they are simply “buoyed up”\(^12\) on the couch, neither talking nor acknowledging each other. This lack of connection between the women, is reflected throughout the novel, and is clearly contrasted by the friendship of Nick and Gatsby, and to some extent that of Nick and Tom. Where Daisy and Jordan talk with “bantering inconsequence”\(^13\), the significant effect of Nick’s friendship with Gatsby is made clear in his acknowledgment of the “vast carelessness”\(^14\) of Tom and Daisy, and the pointlessness of reaching for something better, as Gatsby did. Though perhaps Gatsby didn’t change who Nick was, he did bring about this revelation of life that rings so clearly in Nick’s famous last words\(^15\). Evidently, one can draw parallels between this twentieth century novel to Shakespeare’s Hamlet; in terms of the presentation of women’s friendship, it is a similar story. Much like Hamlet and Horatio, Nick and Gatsby’s friendship had implications even in and after death. In contrast, both Daisy and Ophelia are consistently shown only in relation to the men in their lives.

Fiction, however, is no longer populated solely by the words of men. Woolf states that “all the great women of fiction were...seen only in relation to the other sex”, that is “until Jane

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\(^8\) “One woe doth tread upon another’s heel” William Shakespeare, Hamlet, act 4, scene 7, line 159
\(^9\) William Shakespeare, Hamlet, act 3, scene 1, line 39
\(^10\) Heather Brown, “Gender and Identity in Hamlet: A Modern Interpretation of Ophelia”
\(^11\) Ernest Hemingway, A Movable feast, p60
\(^12\) “an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up” F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, p7
\(^13\) F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, p10
\(^14\) F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, p114
\(^15\) “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, p115
Austen’s day”¹⁶. On the surface, the female protagonists of Austen’s novels seem to fit the mold of what a woman was supposed to be in her time. Miss Bennetmarries Mr Darcy¹⁷ and Catherine Moorland becomes Catherine Tilney¹⁸; it seems all patriarchal duties have been fulfilled. But unlike Ophelia’s character, reliant solely on Hamlet, Catherine Moorland is not shown only in relation to Mr Tilney. Catherine Moorland has friends. In fact, she “almost forgot Mr Tilney while she talked to Miss Thorpe”¹⁹. This alone sets Jane Austen’s characters apart from the women of literature preceding them; they are presented not only with the capacity for romantic love, but also for genuine friendship. Austen’s satirical tone throughout ‘Northanger Abbey’ touches on the absurdity of how men wrote about women, or rather how men wrote about how, in their narrow perspective, they saw women. This attitude can perhaps be seen most clearly in Coventry Patmore’s ‘The Angel of the House’. This 1858 poem addresses how “Man must be pleased; but him to please is woman’s pleasure”²⁰. Patmore attempts to put “the ideal wife on a pedestal”²¹, characterising her as one who “supports her husband, [and] submits to him completely”²². This strongly patriarchal view is prominent in the literature of the nineteenth century, challenged by Austen’s portrayal of women apart from men.

As Woolf highlights, Austen wrote “how Shakespeare wrote”²³ in many ways. Indeed, her eloquence perhaps matched that of Shakespeare, but when it comes to the realistic portrayal of female characters and female friendships, her work surpasses his. This is not to say, however, that even Austen’s protagonists reflect a clear image of female friendships. Miss Morland describes friendship as the “finest balm for the pangs of disappointed love”²⁴, placing friendship under romantic love. This attitude can certainly be attributed to Austen’s middle class, in which marriage was a woman’s purpose. This was a view not shared by the author herself, made clear by the moments of genuine connection between fictitious friends in all of her work, telling of the reality of female friendships so misunderstood in the works of men.

Though the work of Austen by no means brought an end to the dominant focus on the master narrative, she marked a positive step towards changing attitudes. Following Austen were the works of Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson and Charles Dickens, all centered around the world of men. But we also see the emergence of the Bronte sisters and Christina Rossetti, not to mention the works of Woolf herself. Naturally, with the increase of female

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¹⁶ “all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austin’s day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex” Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, p100
¹⁷ Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice
¹⁸ Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey
¹⁹ Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, p25
²⁰ Coventry Patmore, The Angel of the House, p105
²³ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, p81
²⁴ Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, p25
writing came an increase in fictitious female friends. In the 21st century, it is not unusual to read about the interaction of women, from the perspective of a woman. The importance of friendship is clearly portrayed through the interclass, interrace and highly unconventional friendship of Aibileen, Skeeter and Minny in Kathryn Stockett’s ‘The Help’. The novel follows the development of their relationship, amongst the most difficult of circumstances. In Mississippi 1962, skin colour defined one’s class and place in society. But the friendship of Minny, Aibileen and Skeeter breaks down these barriers to the point where Aibileen, a black woman, sees Skeeter, a white woman, as “family”25. The focus on the opposite sex is minimal, and the women’s relationship is by no means reliant on them. Even Skeeter’s potential husband Stuart doesn’t understand her stand against discrimination, accusing her of “stirring up trouble”26. Throughout the novel, Stockett highlights that major issues are not just the domain of conversation between men, but can be discussed and addressed between women, regardless of their relationship with the opposite sex. Where Ophelia’s relationship with Gertrude relied on Hamlet, the genuine friendship of Minny, Aibileen and Skeeter relied on not only mutual admiration, but also the fight for justice previously reserved for men.

One could go as far as to say that, in many instances, the question of whether fictitious friendships rely on the opposite sex is irrelevant; we now see fictitious friendships between the sexes. In Charlotte Brontë’s ‘Jane Eyre’ one can see between Jane and John Rivers the potential for if not a friendship, then a fraternal relationship. Though he “love[d] Rosamond Oliver so wildly”27, he felt it necessary to propose to Jane28, rather than continue to live as friends. Jane, however, will not agree to this; “She would rather live alone than accept a relationship that compromises her independence”29. Whereas in Mark Zusak’s ‘The Book Thief’, the “growing relationship[s] between...Liesel and Max Vandenburg are central to the plot”30. After a bombing raid that shook her friend, she “stayed with him till morning”31, and when he leaves to protect her family, Liesel is left with “silence... not quiet or calm”32. Much like Minny, Skeeter and Aibileen, their friendship comes about in the most difficult of circumstances. She is an Aryan German and he is Jewish living in Nazi Germany 1939. Not only does their relationship overcome the discrimination of their country; it also remains unromantic. Max and Liesel can have a purposeful and genuine friendship without the need for romance. Unlike Fitzgerald’s Daisy, who is not only unable to have a real friend in Jordan, but also cannot possess anything but romantic relationships with men, Liesel can have an authentic relationship with Max without having to be in love with him. Where John Rivers feels he must marry Jane Eyre out of duty, Max is free to love Liesel entirely platonically throughout the book with no romantic obligation. The love between friends was first

25 “Now I feel like we family” Kathryn Stockett, The Help, p436
26 “Why would you want to go stirring up trouble?” The Help, Kathryn Stockett, p382
27 Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre, p431
28 "A missionary’s wife you must- shall be.” Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre, p464
29 Helen Dunmore, “Jane Eyre by Sarah Waters, Margaret Drabble, Jeanette Winterson and others”

30 Phillip Ardagh, “Review: The Book Thief by Markus Zusak”
31 Mark Zusak, The Book Thief, p386
32 Mark Zusak, The Book Thief, p405
reserved only for men, then for both sexes independent of each other. Now fictitious friendships like, that of Liesel and Max, can exist across genders.

Woolf talks of how “So much has been left out, unattempted”\(^{33}\) when it comes to the fictitious friendships of women. From early medieval literature to the 19\(^{th}\) century, friendship independent of the opposite sex was a theme dominated almost solely by men. Then came Jane Austen, who brought to light how, in the words of Woolf, “Sometimes, women do like women”\(^{34}\). Since Austen, the presence of female friendship in literature has strengthened, to the point where today, both sexes are capable of intimate and genuine connection without being reliant on the opposite gender. Not only this, but friendship is no longer confined to those of the same sex; today, fictitious friendships can be between characters of any gender, regardless of romance. Though there remains some “gender imbalance at the heart of the British and American literary establishment”\(^{35}\), gender equality in literature has progressed since Ophelia and Gertrude\(^{36}\). The opportunity is there for authors of both sexes to write of authentic relationships. As literature strives to be more inclusive, fictitious friendships will continue to become less restricted by gender.

\(^{33}\) Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own. p100
\(^{34}\) Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, p99
\(^{35}\) Benadicte Page, “Research shows male writers still dominate books world”
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