

Virginia Woolf's "Shakespeare's Sister" and Paule Marshall's "The Poets in the Kitchen"

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The female artist is a theme in both "Shakespeare's Sister" by Virginia Woolf and "The Poets in the Kitchen" by Paule Marshall. In both essays art is words—writing—and both authors by that definition are artists. Woolf may have a narrow view of what art is though, whereas Marshall considers everyday language and storytelling, particularly that of her Caribbean mother and her mother's friends, to be art too. This difference is important; these authors probably wouldn't agree on what art is and what one needs to be an artist.

In "Shakespeare's Sister," Judith Shakespeare is very much like her brother William, the famous playwright. However, Judith doesn't have the opportunities or freedom that her brother has. She cannot go to school, she is basically learning how to be a wife, and she is expected to marry the man her family wants her to.

She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. (Woolf 241)

When reading the essay, one can't help feeling sorry for Judith; she has the same talent as her brother but no outlet—"Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them" (Woolf 241). Every time she tries to read or write she is interrupted by some housework, which is a major theme for Woolf: interruption. Yet this alone is not why Judith runs away. It's because her family is going to make her marry someone she doesn't love, so she leaves for London. She goes to London like her brother, because of the theater, yet she is not well received there. She cannot be an actress because women are not allowed to act, yet, she "...had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words" (Woolf 241). The reader feels the unfairness. Then, because she can't even afford to eat and has nowhere to go, she accepts the advances of a disgusting stage manager, gets pregnant and kills herself (Woolf 241-242).

To me, Judith's suicide is like slippery-slope faulty reasoning at its finest. Perhaps it's just that Virginia Woolf rubs me the wrong way, but I feel like she is maybe one of the most self-centered writers I've ever read, and not in a fun,

entertaining way but in an exhausting, complaining way that doesn't inspire empathy from me. I understand her indignation that women couldn't be writers (artists) or really much more than housewives until relatively recently. Had I lived over a hundred years ago I probably would have been pretty indignant too. But to read about a woman who may or may not have existed, who may or may not have written, who may or may not have been successful if she could have had a chance is not the sort of writing that makes me stand up and say "How insightful and true!" I feel like it is probably more likely that Judith would go home to her parents and marry the man next door and be sort of miserable but get by just the same, the way many women have over the years. I find it insulting to women for Woolf to write that Judith would rather die because life was disappointing and unfair.

...Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity. (Woolf 242)

That is what Woolf feels, and projects onto her Judith character. I just don't agree. I think part of the reason that I don't agree is that Woolf seems to tie art in with recognition, but I'd say that just because you cannot get recognition as a woman doesn't mean you stop writing or making art. I think Woolf didn't understand disappointment at the most basic level. I think most women have learned to accept disappointment over the years, and not easily becoming a writer or an artist was just another disappointment, or another hurdle to overcome. Woolf dwells so much on the unfairness of it all, for Judith, that it is difficult for me to read or relate to.

Paule Marshall's "The Poets in the Kitchen" is a departure from Woolf's essay because we see that art can be found in day-to-day language and storytelling. This idea is powerful because it means that someone doesn't have to be educated or wealthy to be a successful artist. The women Marshall writes about are her mother and her mother's friends, who are all poor immigrants from Barbados. They aren't terribly educated, but they are very creative with language.

They had taken the standard English taught them in the primary schools of Barbados and transformed it into an idiom, an instrument that more adequately described them—changing the syntax and imposing their own rhythm and accent so that the sentences were more pleasing to their ears. (Marshall 959)

In fact, Marshall gives them credit for being her greatest influences, above Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. This is because she grew up listening to these women in her mother's kitchen, talking to each other.

True I am indebted to those writers, white and black, whom I read during my formative years and still read for instruction and pleasure. But they were preceded in my life by another set of giants whom I always acknowledge before all others: the group of

women around the table long ago. They taught me my first lessons in the narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as a testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen. (Marshall 962)

After the author “graduates from the corner of the kitchen” (Marshall 960), she starts going to the library and discovers reading. It feels like Marshall’s essay will continue like the books *Matilda* or *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, in which a little girl rises above her circumstances and makes a new life based on her love of reading and learning. But there’s a twist; Marshall discovers the writing of Paul Laurence Dunbar, a black writer who writes the way her mother speaks, in dialect; “Although I had a little difficulty at first with the words in dialect, the poem spoke to me as nothing I had read before” (Marshall 961). It is then that Marshall has a sort of epiphany, because she finally has found an author who spoke to her, whom she could relate to. This opened the door for her to seek out other black writers, and to even start writing herself. “And I began to search then for books and stories and poems about ‘The Race’ (as it was put back then), about my people. While not abandoning Thackeray, Fielding, Dickens and the others, I started asking the reference librarian, who was white, for books by Negro writers” (Marshall 961).

This idea speaks to me because I found that growing up I was lucky that I never had a boundary around what art was, so I felt comfortable to make art, and to consider what I made art. I could draw, paint, sculpt, write, sew, dance, take pictures; all of these could be art, and my being a girl didn’t inhibit me. I feel Marshall had an idea of what good art was, what good writing was; Dunbar’s work expanded the definition of art for her. It allowed her to see art in everyday speech, in black writing, and eventually allowed her to be an artist too.

My mother, Cynthia, is the female artist who has inspired me. She grew up in the 1950s and was very beautiful and talented; she won the Miss Greek Oakland teen beauty pageant. She was always sort of sassy, and after she won the pageant she was quoted saying that she wanted to be regarded for something more than her looks. She isn’t a successful artist, but she has talent. She used to entertain me as a child with her drawing and painting and often encouraged me to make my own art. I couldn’t imagine a childhood that didn’t smell like oil paints and turpentine, or one that restricted me creatively. Because of her I have a pretty broad spectrum of what I consider art, and also the confidence to have my own opinion on art. My mother gave me art, she encouraged me to make something with my hands, to entertain myself and others with it, and to make the environment more beautiful.

She wanted to be a painter like my grandfather, but no one was up in arms about this because she was basically just expected to get married and have a family—she didn’t need a career. She married a nice Greek guy and had a son in her early twenties. She studied art at the California College of the Arts and Crafts and San Francisco State University. She divorced her husband and moved to New York with a second husband, but after a few years they divorced too. By the time

she had me she was forty, already a black sheep in her family. She met my father while living in Greece, and they didn't marry. My mom bought a house near my grandfather in a small town south of San Francisco on the coast, but raised me in the semi-converted garage so she could rent out the house for income. I didn't know any family growing up, except my grandfather, and she raised me in a very bohemian way. This garage had burlap and sheets for walls and partitions, built in plywood and 2x4 "furniture," a swing and a trapeze bar in the house, jungle gyms in the backyard from when my mom had a daycare center, a marijuana garden in the secret greenhouse, a fireplace for heat, a clothesline to dry our laundry, a microwave and hot plate for cooking, a plastic shower pan with some heavy duty plastic around it for bathing and most of the light provided by Christmas lights and whatever light came through the lacy tablecloths used as curtains. Yes, she was an artist, not the most productive artist, but more importantly she was not adhering to the norm. For her, life and art were intertwined. Being an artist meant living the life that she wanted. I did not really appreciate this lifestyle when I was growing up, but I wouldn't be who I am if I were raised differently.

So, you see, my perspective on artists is different from that of Virginia Woolf living a hundred years ago, or from Marshall growing up seventy-five years ago. If anything, I wanted to rebel against the bohemian artist's lifestyle and have a more ordinary life. To me the main hindrance to being an artist was not being able to support myself. It wasn't that the career was taboo for a woman, it's that I thought it was unstable for anyone. I remember hearing my mother say all throughout my childhood how she thought that she'd be famous at some point. She would go through phases, painting subjects that she thought would make people want to buy her art, but then not being able to let any of it go because no one wanted to pay what she thought it was worth. My grandfather made being an artist work because he was a housepainter/sign maker first and an artist second, but I think it really helps if you are born wealthy, like Woolf. That way you can do your art but still survive if you aren't really successful. I think that if you have talent and nurture it today, then you can be a success. I don't think school by itself can teach someone to be an artist: you either are or you aren't. This thought is less applicable to a writer, who needs at least some education, but as we read in "The Poets in the Kitchen," you don't need formal education to be artful with words.

Works Cited

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