Friendship: Female Friendship in Media
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Some of the key archetypes of friendship are loyalty, trust, mutual respect and a commitment to each other quite unlike that experienced in matrimony or familial relations. In reality, there is little that physically binds friends to each other, no legal document or science validating the relationship.

Some may argue that this weakens it, whilst others would believe that this simply indicates that to remain in a healthy friendship is even more remarkable, as it is so very easy to practically end it.

In both literature and film, it is as prevalent as it is in real life and appears in all different forms. However, due to the archaic misogynistic ideas which continue to pollute our world, female friendship is often corrupt and unhealthy in comparison to their male counterparts. This is no mistake: friendship often displays the strength of human character and strength is shown to be a quality exclusive to the male sex. Here, I will expose some of the popular types of toxic female friendship normalised in the media we consume, reflecting over the reasoning and wider impact of such depictions.

Competitive Friends:
A bit of healthy competition is not just tolerable in friendship, but useful. To be encouraged by someone you love, urged not to abandon aspirations, is wonderful and should be promoted. Friendship is often built on shared interests which makes it common for friends with similar ambitions to compete with each other. So where does this transcend inspiriting a peer and grow into a clear hatred between both parties, where they are more rivals than close confidants?

Often, when the object of their contest is a male who serves the purpose of being a love interest, we see unmistakeable resentment grow between girls in books and television. This is almost always portrayed as a problem with the relationship between the girls: their bond is weak enough to be severed with painful ease. It does seem that these tropes in media are purely for the male eye, wish-fulfilment which puts the man on a pedestal. He is solely responsible for the deterioration of her other relationships, and this is romanticised to a troubling extent.

One of the first red flags in a romantic relationship is when a person is slowly isolated from their friends and family, the support system which is intensely important in cases of domestic abuse. And, so, it is worrying that the seclusion of women in order for a romantic arc to take place is glamorised.

The Villainisation of Femininity:

Friends can have differences. The sheer complexity of a human being makes it impossible that they wouldn't. Much of the pleasure which accompanies the making of friends is seeing things from a different perspective and developing your own worldview as a result of it. The people we meet shape who we are, which is why echo chambers can be so dangerous. However, in 'Mean Girls', for example, when there is a clique of popular friends, specifically female, they are often ultra-feminine; they value their physical appearance, and viewers are meant to consider them shallow. When the main character, Cady Heron, adopts their more girly style, she too is seen as superficial.

The message of 'Mean Girls' is that real friendships will always be superior to those made to help climb the social hierarchy. However, Cady's 'real friends', and Janis in particular, dress in a far more androgynous/masculine way, subverting gender roles. Whilst women should have the freedom to dress as they like, a clear social message is evident on reflection. Women who have traditionally feminine interests and style will never experience genuine friendship and their relationships lack true meaning. This is an incredibly harmful idea which is perpetuated in countless forms of media and leads to aggression and distrust of women because it is ingrained into children from a young age to demonise the hyper-feminine.

The 'Not Like Other Girls' problem:

Why do female protagonists always struggle to make friends in Young-Adult movies and books?

There is an endless supply of female characters who persistently refuse friendships on account of their preconceived perceptions about women. The 'Not Like Other Girls' movement is both responsible for and arose from these characters.

'Twilight' – the incredibly successful franchise which has become a household name – is often considered to be one of the most influential portrayals of 'Not Like Other Girls'. Bella Swan, the teenage protagonist, consistently dismisses her girlfriends, considering them to be conventional and mainstream unlike her. While the girls go dress shopping, Bella goes to a bookshop, displaying through blatant stereotypes the differences between them. Bella segregates herself from other girls, and we learn over the course of the saga that female friendship is inferior to a heterosexual romantic relationship.

This relates to a wider issue where women resent members of their sex and believe it is more respectable to have male friends. There is an element of self-loathing beneath all this pretension. Furthermore, there is circulation of the view that female friends are far more dramatic than male ones, which unsurprisingly is simply another way to invalidate a woman's emotions and experiences. It is only disheartening that it is a community of women driving this movement, purely for male approval.

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The Sidekick:

Every female lead in a YA rom-com comes with a complementary personal cheerleader. Always quirky and alternative, and possibly an ethnic minority, this character will quip half-heartedly throughout the movie and invest a commendable amount of time in the main character's romantic arc. They are meant to be lovable and unconditionally supportive, but their entire personality is often a foil of the protagonist and so they rarely get to be multi-faced with an equally interesting arc. It is her job to sacrifice her own time and energy to adopt the role of the mentor, demonstrating the one-sided nature of the relationships.

What is problematic about these relationships is this lack of depth translates to the real world, with girls pressured to succumb to the boxes society has laid out before them.

The protagonist is typically white, conventionally attractive and less patently unconventional. They toe a line between fitting current beauty standards perfectly and being gracefully misunderstood, contrasting, therefore, with their friends who are decidedly non-conformist.

A relatively recent example of this was in 'Tall Girl', where the main character, Jodi, has a Black best friend: Fareeda who is the embodiment of the sassy Black woman trope. Fareeda does an impeccable job to embody the sidekick trope, but we see her acknowledge how this is detrimental to her when she says, "Sometimes I wonder what it'd be like to go to lunch with my friends and have them ask me about my problems."

This is a painful reminder of why we need to flesh out female characters and let their friendships be mutually beneficial; it is emotionally draining and dehumanises what has become a glorified emotional-support animal. This friendship is shamelessly exploitative and yet we are encouraged to settle for it as the only ethnic representation we can hope to get in mainstream media.

This leads me on to my next point which primarily involves women-of colour.

The Martyr:

This specific female friendship trope has wormed its way into a variety of genres. It is a friendship between a white or white-passing woman and a woman-of-colour which is romanticised and relatively healthy up until the POC woman dies. She is preferably murdered, so as to instill the urge for revenge within the surviving white character. Not only does this imply that the creator does not value BIPOC characters as they do white ones and has made a concession by including them at all, but it sends a deeper political message.

White allies often seem to have larger platforms and it is often their voice which is heard regarding race issues. The white-saviour complex where a white person takes

it upon themselves to personally eradicate racism, subsequently silencing the views of the people most impacted by it is mirrored in this trope.

In fantasy, the death of a POC who believed in a certain movement often sparks the white protagonist's journey; they are reduced to a mere plot device to return the focus to the white woman.

An example of this is in the YA fantasy series, 'Throne of Glass' where the death of Nehemia – one of the only explicitly Black characters in the whole series – spurs the white lead, Celaena, into action. In fact, the book notes that Nehemia orchestrates her death purposefully to encourage her friend, and so fully commits to this trope in a manner which seems almost satirical; it is so on-the-nose.

It is deeply problematic that the greatest contribution a woman-of-colour can make for these fantastical political causes is her death, and this is a pattern which is frequently mistaken for diversity. It abnormalises interracial female friendships, suggesting that they exist to benefit the white woman, almost a fable in the fact that they appear to exist to portray a moral message.

'Don't Worry Darling', which was just released, unfortunately contains this dubious plotline, and, despite marketing itself as progressive, focuses entirely on white feminism. The focus of the movie is Alice, a blonde, white woman who is the definition of a doting housewife. It is her former friend, Margaret, who initially sees the cracks in their utopian community and this isolates her from the otherwise entirely white housewives. When Alice sees a plane crash in the desert, she receives a call from Margaret asking if she too saw the plane. And, instead of seizing the opportunity for two women to take the other in confidence and trust them, the movie has Alice lie which leads to Margaret's suicide. The graphic imagery of her death is used as a motif throughout the film, spurring Alice on in her journey to freedom. This takes away Margaret's humanity in an utterly repulsive fashion, objectifying her flagrantly and tarnishing the movie for many people-of-colour. Rather than letting Black women be morally complex and have developed friendships, it appears that, even in our modern times, the film industry is unwilling to put effort into nuanced female friendships.

I would like to finish by pondering over this excerpt from Thomas Middleton's Jacobean tragedy, 'Women Beware Women', first published in 1657:

Oh the deadly snares
That women set for women—without pity
Either to soul or honour! Learn by me
To know your foes. In this belief I die:
Like our own sex, we have no enemy, no enemy!
—Thomas Middleton, Women Beware Women 5.2.209–13

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The value of friendship, regardless of sex, is undeniable; it fulfils the basic human desire for companionship and yet is less likely to spiral into infatuation and obsession as romantic relationships so frequently do.

In order to survive in a world with deep-rooted patriarchal values and ideals, women feel pressured to consider members of their gender automatic adversaries. We are taught a strange, animalistic strategy of being ruthless, ready to hurt other women in order to further our own goals. The media plays a huge role in the longevity of this mindset, and creatives must start to consider the implications of the material they put out into the world.

In the end, sisterhood between women is beautiful and, while there is no universal experience, that in no way excuses the multitude of toxic relationships scattered haphazardly in literature and film. I hope that this helps you to recognise the disparity between the characterisation of female and male friendships, and relays to you the importance of understanding that the fight for gender equality is still ongoing.

If a basic human experience like friendship can be so completely soiled by involving women, I think it's clear that the women's rights movement should not stop at the right to vote but instead the right to be human.

Because what makes us human is the vulnerability and trust friendship demands of us.

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