



Agree to Disagree: Perception of Beauty in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha*

Ashley Zhu

Hunter College High School, New York, United States of America

Email: ashleyzhu111@gmail.com

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Abstract— *Maud Martha*, a 1953 novel written by the award-winning, African American, female poet Gwendolyn Brooks, is a richly told exploration of beauty, people's perceptions of it, and its consequences. Brooks explores the connection between being ordinary and being beautiful, and how such descriptions can affect each other. *Maud Martha*, the novel's titular character, spends her formative years in 1940s urban and mostly black Chicago, thinking about the beautiful things around her and far away from her. Through her story and growth as a person, Brooks asks us to question our own perceptions of beauty, as well as our categorizations of it.

Keywords— Gwendolyn Brooks, beauty, coming-of-age, perception, *Maud Martha*.



I. INTRODUCTION

Maud Martha, Gwendolyn Brooks's first and only published piece of adult fiction, is a coming-of-age story told through a series of vignettes. Although *Maud Martha* is one of Brooks's few prosaic works, it maintains the lyrical and description-rich qualities of her more widely-known poetry. Brooks's beautiful writing allows us to picture the beauty of the objects she describes to be beautiful, thereby allowing her to question the influence and importance of beauty.

Brooks uses beauty to examine the complex relationships and connections present in *Maud Martha*, and to question how beauty might affect such relationships in the real world. *Maud Martha* finds most of the world to be beautiful, but she particularly highlights the beauty of dandelions, New Yorkers, and the idea of her own death. Her idea of beauty, shown through these three concepts, gives us valuable insights on how she believes the people around her view her, and how that has affected what she sees as beautiful.

Maud Martha's idea of beauty is ultimately unique: she finds more and different beauty in the world around her. As *Maud Martha* reflects upon, admires, and

idealizes her surroundings, however, Brooks shows us that her uncommon view of beauty is influenced by the ordinary view of her she believes others hold. Brooks then speaks to the interconnectedness between others' perceptions of us and our perceptions of the world around us.

II. REFLECTION

Through *Maud Martha*'s reflection on the beauty of the dandelions she often sees, and the aspects of them she considers to be beautiful, Brooks implies that her fond view of the dandelions is influenced by how she wants other people to perceive her fondly. Because she believes others see her as ordinary, she finds a particular sense of beauty in the dandelions, which she sees as ordinary but beautiful nevertheless.

When describing her back yard, *Maud Martha* considers why dandelions are special to her:

[Dandelions were] yellow jewels for everyday... She liked their demure prettiness second to their everydayness; for in that latter quality she thought she saw a picture of herself, and it was comforting to find that what was common could also be a flower. (2)

Maud Martha's description of dandelions as both "jewels" and "flower[s]" juxtaposes the polished beauty of jewels against the more natural beauty of flowers. While flowers are lovely as soon as they grow, jewels must be polished and cut before they can be considered beautiful. Maud Martha later describes the dandelions as "for everyday," contrasting the uniqueness and specialty typically associated with "jewels" with the monotony typically associated with "everyday" life. Through this phrasing, Brooks implies that uniqueness and monotony exist simultaneously in Maud Martha's life. The uniqueness in Maud Martha's life is tied to her description of the dandelions as "jewels," which must be intentionally shaped to become more beautiful, while the monotony in her life is connected to the fact that the dandelions are, in reality, common flowers. Brooks demonstrates that while monotony is natural in Maud Martha's life, she must intentionally seek out uniqueness. Brooks thus suggests that Maud Martha wishes to be more unique, and ties this wish to how beautiful she thinks the dandelions are.

The image below illustrates Maud Martha's view of dandelions: there exists a duality between their beauty as unique and individual flowers and their beauty because they



are common and thus part of a field of dandelions.

Fig. 1: Field of dandelions blooming.

Maud Martha also describes the "demure prettiness" of dandelions to be the quality she likes "second" about them, while their "everydayness" is the quality she likes first. Brooks's use of the word "second" contrasts with the chronological order in which she cites the dandelions' traits, as well as her use of the word "latter" when describing the dandelions' everydayness. Then, although Maud Martha may like the "everydayness" of the dandelions more than their "demure prettiness," she thinks of their prettiness first.

This prettiness, however, is also a trait Maud Martha believes other people search for first when they see her, as she later describes the difference between herself and her younger sister: "Helen was still the one they wanted in

the wagon, still 'the pretty one,' 'the dainty one...' She did not know what it was... I'm much smarter... she thought" (35). Maud Martha's uncertainty as to why people value Helen more because of her "[prettiness]" and "[daintiness]" is similar to her determination to find the dandelions' "everydayness" more important despite thinking of their "demure prettiness" first. Just as she immediately thinks of the dandelions' prettiness, she believes other people immediately think of her lack of prettiness, rather than her intelligence, when they see her. On the other hand, when they see Helen, they "[want] her in the wagon" because they immediately see her beauty, without considering other aspects of her that may be worse in comparison with Maud Martha. Maud Martha's defiant thought that she is "much smarter" Maud Martha's view of what makes the dandelions beautiful is thus connected to her view of how other people see her, and whether or not they believe her to be beautiful.

Brooks also writes that Maud Martha sees "a picture of herself" in the dandelions. That Maud Martha does not see herself, but rather, a picture of herself, implies that she sees the dandelions in a similar way to how she believes other people view her. Maud Martha calls the dandelions "flower[s]" despite dandelions being more commonly known as weeds, and cites their everydayness as a trait she enjoys. Similarly, although she is certain that the people around her see her as ordinary, she hopes that they will find that quality of her to be beautiful.

III. ADMIRATION

Maud Martha fiercely admires New York's beauty despite others not believing she will ever be able to visit it. Through her descriptions of New York, and the specific reasons why she finds it beautiful, Brooks implies that to her, New York's beauty is enhanced by others' lack of belief in her ability to one day fulfill her dream and visit it. Maud Martha's hopeful nature in fact leads her to find a particular sense of beauty in things that others believe she cannot have.

After seeing magazines mentioning New York, Maud Martha begins to think about what it is like there. Visiting New York becomes a dream for her:

What she wanted to dream, and dreamed, was her affair. It pleased her to dwell upon soft bready textures... What was the matter with that? Besides, who could safely swear that she would never be able to make her dream come true for herself? Not altogether, then!—but slightly?—in some part? (51)

Maud Martha's defensiveness, as demonstrated with the phrases "was her affair" and "What was the matter with

that," indicates that she is aware others do not believe she will ever be New York-bound. The word "affair," however, also serves to give Maud Martha's dream a romantic and secret connotation. Brooks implies that Maud Martha keeps her dream a secret because she thinks no one will believe she is capable of achieving it, and ties her fascination with New York and the beauty she finds in it to her need to be covert about it. Through this phrase, Brooks indirectly associates Maud Martha's fear that no one will believe in her with her romanticization of New York.

Maud Martha's defensiveness continues with the following phrases, in which she asserts that she enjoys "[dwelling] upon" certain parts of New York. Brooks uses the word "dwell" to indicate that Maud Martha trivializes her own desires. Because Maud Martha states this after admitting she realizes that others do not believe she will be able to achieve her dream, others' uncertainty in Maud Martha have also made her less convinced that she will one day be able to visit New York.

However, Brooks also ties the specialness of New York to Maud Martha's hopeful nature regarding it: Maud Martha later describes "bread textures" as one of the things she enjoys thinking about. Through her use of the word "bread," she indicates that New York's beauty is substantial and fully satisfying. However, the additional word "soft" juxtaposes this idea against a lighter and airier connotation that implies that Maud Martha is hopeful about visiting New York. Maud Martha then implies that no one would be able to "safely swear" she would not be able to "make her dream come true for herself." Maud Martha uses both the words "safely" and "swear" despite their redundancy to emphasize that she is questioning whether anyone could be fully certain of her inability to achieve her dream. This phrasing reinforces the idea that Maud Martha is aware of the implausibility of her dream, and reveals that she is choosing to focus on the slight chance that it will come true instead.

Maud Martha's acknowledgement that she may not be able to fulfill her dream "altogether" is followed by her stating that she might fulfill it somewhat twice: she may be able to make her dream come true "slightly," or "in some part." This phrasing again emphasizes that Maud Martha puts greater emphasis on her ability to make her dream come true partially than her inability to make it come true fully. She is hopeful about her abilities, and continues to extoll the beauty of New York despite others' belief that she cannot have it. While New York's unique beauty causes many to believe Maud Martha will never be able to visit, it instead fills Maud Martha with hope and determination to achieve her dream.

The following figure illustrates Maud Martha's view of New York: its beauty comes, in part, from its distance.



Fig. 2: New York City, viewed from a distance.

IV. IDEALIZATION

Through Maud Martha's idealization of pioneer women, Brooks suggests that her idea that pain is beautiful comes from her desire to be thought well of by people she does not know. She holds in highest regard the opinions of those distant from her, while comparatively dismissing the thoughts of those closer to her. Brooks thus highlights the connections between Maud Martha's views on other people and their emotional proximity to her.

After disagreeing with Paul on where they should live, Maud Martha wonders if she should be willing to sacrifice more for him. She thinks about pioneer women and their strength:

A procession of pioneer women strode down her imagination; strong women, bold; praiseworthy, faithful, stout-minded; with a stout light beating in the eyes... She thought of herself, dying for her man. It was a beautiful thought. (59)

Maud Martha describes pioneer women as a "procession" who "[stride]" down her imagination, presenting them as a confident parade of people. This confidence and unity contrast with Maud Martha's uncertainty over whether she should be arguing with Paul, and her lack of people to support her. She continues to describe the women as "strong women" who are "bold," suggesting that she believes that for women, strength can only come from supporting their husbands.

This implication contrasts Brooks's previous statement: "Maud Martha silently decided she wouldn't, and resolved to hold out firmly..." (58). Maud Martha's own "[resolve]" and "[firmness]" provides a similar connotation to the pioneer women's "[strength]" and "[boldness]." However, the fact that Maud Martha later becomes uncertain over whether she should "hold out"

implies that her resolve and firmness are weaker than the pioneer women's strength and boldness. Similarly, Maud Martha's desire to be like the pioneer women is also stronger than her resolve. When she later describes the pioneer women as "praiseworthy," she implies that she, too, wants to be worthy of praise. Although Brooks demonstrates that Maud Martha is one of the people who are praising the pioneer women, she is unclear as to who else is praising them. It is, however, implied that the people praising the pioneer women, and thus the people who Maud Martha would like to praise her, are people whom Maud Martha does not know or feel close to. The fact that Maud Martha stays firm when Paul wants her to act differently, but her resolve wavers when she thinks of the praise of people she does not know, implies that she is affected more by the opinions of those whom she does not know than those whom she does.

Maud Martha then thinks of "herself, dying for her man," and describes it as "a beautiful thought." By suggesting she would like to die for Paul, Maud Martha invokes a possibility far more extreme than the sacrifices she had previously suggested would be praiseworthy, such as agreeing with her husband on his choice of home, or cooking for him in low temperatures. Brooks uses this idea to suggest that Maud Martha thinks of her sacrifices as more beautiful when she suffers more pain through them. The author's descriptions of the pioneer women as "stout" and "with a stout light beating in the eyes" suggests that Maud Martha believes them being able to endure things for their husbands makes them more "praiseworthy." Brooks suggests that Maud Martha's own desire to be good, and to sacrifice herself for others, surfaces from her desire to be thought well of by those whom she does not know. Maud Martha thus sees pain as beautiful because she would like to be less ordinary in the eyes of others, and thinks suffering is the only way to achieve that.

The following image displays pioneer women, whom Maud Martha admires because of their stoutness and determination.



Fig. 3: A photograph of pioneer women.

V. CONCLUSION

Brooks uses flowery language and descriptive phrases to demonstrate Maud Martha's unique sense of beauty. She indicates that the ordinary view others have of Maud Martha affects this sense of beauty. The beauty Maud Martha finds in the dandelions in her back yard, New York, and suffering reflects on others' perception of her.

Brooks speaks to society's tendency to unfairly label people as "ordinary," and, paradoxically, the individuality this tendency can bring out. In many ways, *Maud Martha* is a reflection on relatability; even those who share nothing with Maud Martha will not struggle to relate to her when she feels despair, or joy, at small realities of everyday life. Yet, if Maud Martha is "ordinary" because ordinary people can relate to her, she must also be unique: no one in the world, upon reading *Maud Martha*, will find that they share with her all her dreams, aspirations, frustrations, and uncertainties. Ultimately, Brooks suggests that often, what makes others perceive one as "ordinary" is actually what sets them apart from everyone else.

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