

Kill the Bitch!

The ovation was heartfelt and overwhelming as Carmen strutted down the Seville plaza stairway for her curtain call. The audience loved her again tonight playing one of the greatest opera heroines of all time. A whore, a drug smuggler, a gang member, a petty thief, a drifter, and a bitch who drove men out of their fucking minds. But tonight on this stage, in this auditorium, she is more than life, she is art.

Just a few hours before the start of Carmen's seductive performance, I found myself in real life, standing between a young, good looking man who wanted to fight and kill a rival because his bitch was eating Thanksgiving Dinner with him in the Loaves & Fishes Dining Room. His eyes were bulging with hate, and every muscle in his large body was taut. He shouted in rage each time the exit door of the Dining Room opened, screaming at his rival inside to come out and fight. Then he shouted at his bitch to bring the rival out so that they could settle it. It was over in a minute or two. Alan, the street monitor, talked him down and the paralysis of his body subsided. He spun around and still shouting, he stalked off down North C St.. I was sure this unfinished business about his bitch would be resolved later that day in some other place. His bitch is the Carmen in real life. The opera bitch is the Carmen in art.

I have often wondered about this paradox: what is so unacceptable in life, and to be avoided at all costs, can be transformed into art, which makes it worthy of respect and applause. It is as if what is portrayed in art does not represent the reality, which it depicts. Whorehouses, beer joints, slum restaurants, ghettos, all the violent and seamy underpinnings of society, provide the setting for many of the world's most famous paintings in the last 100 years. But the life-reality of these settings, and the people who populate them, is totally abhorrent to the patrons who finance this art. For the most part, the artists themselves, now held in the greatest esteem, were society misfits, alcoholics, addicts, womanizers and nervous wrecks. Once seamy reality is transformed into art, it becomes beautiful, passionate, touching, sensitive and admired.

I have observed this about literature as well. In prize-winning novels, the characters are often unfaithful, mired down with addictions, and perpetrate

violence of every sort. Yet, these critically acclaimed novels and characters are transformed into the literature of polite society.

Do you think it possible that if opera or literature could transform homeless people in Sacramento into art, wealthy patrons would applaud and respect them, and the criminal justice system would cut them some slack? I must be imagining things.