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# The Representation of Gender in Modern English Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** In literature, gender refers to how authors and characters define themselves and how society evaluates them based on their gender. Sex, gender, and sexuality shape narrative texts and readers' understanding of them in many ways.

## Gender Roles in Society

Gender roles serve as individual codes of behavior determined by societal expectations of different sexes. It's important to understand that sex, gender, and sexuality are not the same thing:

- Sex is a biological concept determined by primary sex characteristics.
- Gender refers to the identities, values, and roles which individuals ascribe to different sexes.
- Sexuality refers to the orientation of desire towards a particular sex.

Strict gender roles resulted in a system that privileged straight white men over other categories of people. It affected individuals' access to education, financial support, and career. Eventually, feminism has emerged worldwide to advocate for political, economic, social, and personal equality of all genders.

**KEYWORDS:** gender, society, English literature, sexuality, modern, representation

## I.INTRODUCTION

In the past, certain books negatively affected individuals' perception of themselves in several ways:

	By promoting strict gender roles and stereotypes.
	By disciplining those who didn't fit into the established norm.
	By influencing how people of different genders could participate in the world of literature as writers, readers, and characters.

Due to these factors, literature served as a backdrop for the emerging of gender criticism. This field of study had a significant impact on how people perceived gender roles.[1,2,3]

Gender criticism is an extension of literary criticism, focusing on how cultures use symbols to define and impose the traits of a particular gender on a person. Here are some of the things that it addresses:

- Gendered language. For example, it includes using masculine pronouns (he, him, his) to refer to people in general. This tendency occurred as a result of the historical patriarchy where being a man was a norm, and a woman was marked as "the other."
- Choice of characters. Male characters often took the leading role, establishing their masculinity and physical power. Female characters had to accept authority without any choice of freedom and independence.
- Perception of the author's gender. Men writers had a serious advantage in telling their own stories. In contrast, women's writing was considered immoral, treated with bias, and harshly criticized. As a result, they had to publish under male pseudonyms to have a chance of professional acceptance among writers.



### Gender Stereotyping in Literature

Literature had a significant impact on the promotion of gender stereotypes. For a long time, history books only contained biographies of men and ignored stories of women. As female authors were rare, most books that featured women put them in stereotypical roles.

Analysis of such texts can help us single out several categories of female stereotyping:

	Obedient	In <i>Death of a Salesman</i> by Arthur Miller, Linda is a giving wife who never gives up on her abusive husband, Willy, and always supports him.
	Beautiful and seductive	Pamela Flitton in Anthony Powell's <i>A Dance to the Music of Time</i> infatuated the officers with her seductive looks and beauty.
	Emotionally trapped	In Gustave Flaubert's <i>Madame Bovary</i> , the titular character is dissatisfied with the bourgeois society she lives in and the social status she didn't choose.
	Woman as object of love	In <i>The Fisherman and His Soul</i> , Oscar Wilde writes about a fisherman who fell in love with a beautiful mermaid—a pure and innocent creature with golden hair.

Gender stereotyping also led to a limited view of masculinity in literature. This, in turn, had a negative impact on how society raised boys. Men were often portrayed as dominant, authoritative, competitive, and aggressive. This depiction put a lot of pressure on men and prohibited a wide range of emotional expression.

### Reverse Gender Roles in Literature

In an age when men were expected to be strong and decisive, and women passive and submissive, Shakespeare raises questions about the standard portrayal of genders. In his play *Macbeth*, he makes a submissive man and his dominant wife the two main antiheroes. He depicts two people who are unwilling to accommodate themselves to society's expectations.[4,5,6]

Shakespeare merged femininity and masculinity in his characters to show that people of each gender could possess both sets of traits. Modern literature has a more liberated approach to the subversion of gender roles, taking cues from Shakespeare and other great authors.

### Representation of Women in Literature

In the following sections, we will discuss how the representation of female characters in literature has evolved throughout history. We will also look into examples of how women authors were marginalized by the era in which they were living. Their vision and courage had a significant impact on the literary world and beyond.

### Women in Medieval Literature

Throughout the Medieval period, women were treated as second-class citizens, and their needs were largely ignored. Despite the suppression, many literary works included women characters.

If we analyze literary texts from that period, we will find common female archetypes of medieval society. Here are some of the most prominent ones:

- The Virgin is a pure woman whose primary function is to get married.
- The Mother is a woman who does everything to support her children and her man.
- The Witch is a wise, non-conforming, or unusually beautiful woman who is punished for her “otherness.”
- The Whore is a woman considered lower than men, deviant, and unworthy of having a job.[7,8,9]



## II.DISCUSSION

One of the examples of an archetypal female character in medieval literature is Grendel's mother from Beowulf. She subverts society's ideals by protecting her son, who is a foe of humankind.

### Women in Gothic Literature

Gothic authors allowed female characters to break free of stereotypical constraints. It also helped to add depth and suspense to a plot. There are two prominent female roles in Gothic literature: a predator and a victim.

- The predator is dangerous yet powerfully attractive. According to an article on Research Gate, this role is connected to pain/pleasure paradox in Gothic literature, which is the endless search for happiness that prevents one from obtaining it.
- The victim is vulnerable and fragile. This role gives the male heroes someone to save. Women who fill this role are often able to sympathize with monsters.

Gothic writers often blurred the line between the two types. Usually, they did it to show the tragedy of women trapped in their gender roles. For example, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a story about female madness caused by patriarchal oppression.

Many gothic women writers were able to portray domestic entrapment and female sexuality in interesting and expressive ways. Authors such as the Bronte sisters, Mary Shelley, and Ann Radcliffe played a central part in popularizing women's writing.[10,11,12]

### Strong Women in Literature

World literature has given us a variety of strong female characters. These fictional women took a radical stance for themselves and broke through the conventional boundaries of gender. Have a look at the examples of literature's most inspiring women below:

Elizabeth Bennet from <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> by Jane Austen	Matilda from <i>Matilda</i> by Roald Dahl
Elizabeth is a confident woman who would rather sacrifice financial security than be stuck in a loveless marriage. Elizabeth takes pride in herself and calls men out for their rude behavior.	A six-year-old girl stands up for herself while maintaining her optimism and innocence. Born into a cruel and uncultured family, Matilda teaches herself how to read by the age of 4 and finds her strength in books.

### Black Women in Literature

Black women writers first appeared in 1859 as a part of a general renaissance of black literature. Writing became a way to voice their rejection of slavery and racism, as well as their claim to freedom and equality.

In the mid-1800s, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* became an early example of a black woman's strength over oppression. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a growing number of black women artists emerged throughout the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Black women's literature inspired many people worldwide and had a major impact on the consciousness of African-American women. Toni Morrison's slave novel *Beloved* became the most influential work of African-American literature of the late 20th century. Maya Angelou's memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* inspired generations of 21<sup>st</sup>-century women writers.





### **Gender Roles in Literature: Examples**

In the following sections, we will unravel some examples of traditional gender roles from famous literary works. This analysis will help you examine your understanding of masculinity and femininity from a different angle.

#### **Gender & Feminism in The Yellow Wallpaper**

Charlotte Gilman's gothic tale *The Yellow Wallpaper* was an early feminist indictment of Victorian Patriarchy. The author gives an account of a woman driven to madness by a Victorian "rest-cure." According to the article from *The Conversation*, "rest-cures" were periods of inactivity prescribed to women with nervous conditions. This therapy was prescribed to Charlotte Gilman herself.

Although the autobiographical aspect of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is compelling, it is the symbolism that adds a lot of meaning to the story. The narrator's husband puts his "hysterical" wife in a nursery room with yellow wallpapers. Charlotte Gilman uses the analogy of entrapment to critique the position of women within the institution of marriage.[13,14]

All in all, the constraints placed upon the narrator by her husband are what drove her insane. She is forced to become passive and repress her emotional state. The protagonist has no choice but to retreat into her obsessive fantasy—the only place she can control.

#### **Theme of Gender in Othello**

In his famous play *Othello*, Shakespeare juxtaposes female and male characters to expose the negative impact of gender stereotypes. *Othello* is a noble military general whose jealousy and anxiety get him to kill his wife and then himself.

The theme of Shakespeare's play stems from men's misunderstanding of women and women's inability to protect themselves from society's judgment. *Othello* kills his wife Desdemona because of the false rumors about her unfaithfulness. These rumors are spread by Iago—a misogynist jealous of *Othello*'s relationship with Desdemona. The Moor's failure to trust his innocent and loving wife and identify his deceiver is what destroys him.

But what was the actual source of *Othello*'s anxieties? Society of that time believed that men with traditionally feminine characteristics such as empathy and trust were weak. *Othello* possessed these qualities, and it made him a victim of his own insecurity. He is an example of toxic masculinity—a man who was destroyed by the true nature of patriarchy.

Gender is only one of the play's many fascinating topics. If you want to learn more about them, check out our article on themes in *Othello*.

### **III.RESULTS**

#### **Gender Roles in To Kill a Mockingbird**

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a story about a wrongly accused black man and a lawyer confronting racial injustice. It also focused on the journey of a girl named Scout who challenges gender stereotypes and wants to be a tomboy.

Harper Lee explores the overcomplicated social hierarchy of the American South through differences in status. The rigid social divisions led to a man being falsely accused of rape because of the color of his skin.[15,16]

In this setting, society dictates what's suitable for each gender. As a result, people rarely cross the barrier between masculinity and femininity. Scout Finch rejects the feminine in her because she wants to grow up on her own terms. She sees femininity as a trap and believes that masculinity doesn't have as many rules. Scout's view of femininity changes when she learns that being a woman takes just as much courage as being a man.



People have different associations with men and women, which form a basis of their gender stereotypes. Even though stereotypes differ between various gender subgroups (Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999), men tend to be generally seen as more competent and women as more warm (Kite, Deaux, & Haines, 2008). Women have also been found to be perceived generally more favorably than men (Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1991). Given that gender stereotypes tend to be accurate (Swim, 1994), people may learn them through observation and induction. They are also transmitted by social learning and communicated by family, peers, and media (Kite et al., 2008).

Studies examining the depiction of men and women in media have shown that gender stereotypes are mirrored in various forms of media. A recent meta-analysis of studies of gender depiction in advertisements showed that women are more likely to be portrayed at home, associated with domestic products, not speaking, and in a dependent role (Eisend, 2010). In children's cartoons, male characters were more likely to be portrayed as independent, assertive, athletic, and technical, while female character were more likely to be portrayed as emotional, warm, affectionate, and frail (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Similarly, male characters in popular movies were more likely than female characters to have a leadership role, occupational power over others, and goals (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005). In an analysis of adjectives used to describe characters in prize-winning children's books from 1984 to 1994, Turner-Bowker (1996) found that the adjectives used for male characters were evaluated as more masculine, active, and potent and the adjectives used to describe female characters were evaluated more positively.[17,18]

Apart from the difference in depiction of male and female characters in various media, the proportion of characters of the two genders also differs. Even though the ratio of male to female characters in children's books varied over the twentieth century, the characters were more likely to be male than female for most of the century. Only in 1910s and 1990s was the proportion of male and female characters approximately equal (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011). Women have also been found to be underrepresented among television characters (Elasmar, Hasegawa, & Brain, 1999), in movies (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005), in fiction books (Underwood, Bamman, & Lee, 2018), and in children's cartoons (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995).

Recent creation of the Google Books Ngram corpus (Michel et al., 2011) has enabled the study of depiction of male and female characters in a large volume of the fiction literature. Google Books Ngram corpus contains data about word usage from more than 5 million books. The data relate to n-grams, which are sequences of n words used in a text. Previous studies used the corpus to study, for example, the use of emotion-related words in books (Acerbi, Lampos, Garnett, & Bentley, 2013), the use of individualistic words and phrases (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012a), or censorship of topics and regularization of irregular verbs (Michel et al., 2011). Some studies have also explored issues related to gender. Mason, Kuntz, and McGill (2015) found that women appeared in English-language books less often than men and that, in comparison to women, men tended to be relatively more often described as "young" than "old". Twenge, Campbell, and Gentile (2012b) found that male pronouns occurred more often in U.S. books than female pronouns and that the ratio of their use was highest during the 1950s and early 1960s, and that it has been decreasing from then on. Finally, Ye, Cai, Chen, Wan, and Qian (2018), who used a similar method as the present study, found that in English-language books, men tended to be more often described in terms associated with agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism traits of the Big Five model and that they were described similarly often as women in terms associated with openness.[19,20,21] However, Ye et al. (2018) did not take into account that men were generally relatively more often described with an adjective than women, which could have confounded some of their results. That is, men could be more often described by adjectives associated with a certain factor just because they are more often described by any adjective.

In the present study, we use the Google Books Ngram corpus to explore the depiction of men and women in the English-language literature and its development in the 20th century. In particular, we focus on adjectives that were used in association with nouns "man", "woman", "boy", and "girl". The four nouns were selected to study both the effect of gender and a possible difference between portrayal of adults and children. We explored whether male or female characters were depicted in more masculine and positive terms. We also examined how these differences, for both adult and children characters, changed during the century. Relatedly, we examined the variability of the terms used to depict the two genders. High variability of positivity could indicate, for example, that the characters are described in black-and-white terms, while low variability could suggest more nuance in the depiction. Finally, we looked at similarities of terms used in association with the selected nouns and their development during the century. The data on historical development of the perception of men and women are scarce and difficult to obtain retrospectively. Insofar that the depiction of men and women in the literature reflects their contemporary perception, the method used in the present study could allow us to study views of men and women indirectly. More importantly, the depiction of men and women in books is of interest in itself given that it might influence opinions and views of readers (Gelman, 2009, Lewis and Lupyan, 2019, Lupyan and Lewis, 2017, Paluck and Green, 2009).[22,23]



A system of grammatical gender, whereby every noun was treated as either masculine, feminine, or neuter, existed in Old English, but fell out of use during the Middle English period; therefore, Modern English largely does not have grammatical gender. Modern English lacks grammatical gender in the sense of all noun classes requiring masculine, feminine, or neuter inflection or agreement; however, it does retain features relating to natural gender with particular nouns and pronouns (such as woman, daughter, husband, uncle, he and she) to refer specifically to persons or animals of one or other sexes and neuter pronouns (such as it) for sexless objects. Also, in some cases, feminine pronouns are used by some speakers when referring to ships (and more uncommonly some airplanes and analogous machinery), to churches, and to nation states and islands.

Usage in English has evolved with regards to an emerging preference for gender-neutral language. There is now large-scale use of neuter they as a third-person singular instead of the default generic he when referring to a person of unknown gender. Certain traditional feminine forms of nouns (such as authoress and poetess) are also increasingly avoided, with the male form of such nouns (author and poet) having become gender-neutral.<sup>[1]</sup>

Old English had a system of grammatical gender similar to that of modern German, with three genders: masculine, feminine, neuter. Determiners and attributive adjectives showed gender inflection in agreement with the noun they modified. Also the nouns themselves followed different declension patterns depending on their gender. Moreover, the third-person personal pronouns, as well as interrogative and relative pronouns, were chosen according to the grammatical gender of their antecedent.

Old English grammatical gender was, as in other Germanic languages, remarkably opaque: that is, one often could not know the gender of a noun by its meaning or by the form of the word; this was especially true for nouns referencing inanimate objects. Learners would have had to simply memorize which word has which gender.<sup>[2]:10</sup> Although nouns referring to human males were generally masculine and for the most part words for human females were feminine, as Charles Jones noted, "it is with those nouns which show explicit female reference that the sex specifying function of the gender classification system appears to break down, ..." Most words referencing human females were feminine, but there was a sizable number of words that were either neuter or even masculine.<sup>[2]:6-7</sup> Here are the discrepant nouns referring specifically to human females as listed by Jones:<sup>[2]:7</sup>

Old English had multiple generic nouns for "woman" stretching across all three genders: for example, in addition to the neuter wif and the masculine wifmann listed above, there was also the feminine frowe.<sup>[2]:6</sup> For the gender-neutral nouns for "child", there was the neuter bearn and the neuter cild (compare English child). And even with nouns referring to persons, one could not always determine gender by meaning or form: for example, with two words ending in -mæg, there was the female-specific neuter noun wynmæg, meaning "winsome maid" or attractive woman; as well as the gender-neutral noun meaning "paternal kindred" or member of father's side of the family, but which was grammatically feminine: fædermæg.<sup>[2]:7-8</sup>

In short, inanimate objects are frequently referred to by gendered pronouns, and, conversely, there exist nouns referring to people having a grammatical gender that does not match their natural gender. Nonetheless, in Old English, pronouns may follow natural gender rather than grammatical gender in some cases. For details of the declension patterns and pronoun systems, see Old English grammar.

#### Decline of grammatical gender[24]

While inflectional reduction seems to have been incipient in the English language itself, some theories suggest that it was accelerated by contact with Old Norse, especially in northern and midland dialects.<sup>[3]</sup> This correlates with the geographical extent of the Viking Danelaw in the late 9th and early 10th centuries: for almost a century Norse constituted a prestige language with regard to the southern Northumbrian and east Mercian dialects of Old English.

By the 11th century, the role of grammatical gender in Old English was beginning to decline:<sup>[4]</sup> the Middle English of the 13th century was in transition to the loss of a gender system.<sup>[5][6]</sup> One element of this process was the change in the functions of the words the and that (then spelt þe and þat; see also Old English determiners): previously these had been non-neuter and neuter forms respectively of a single determiner, but in this period they came to be used generally as a definite article and that as a demonstrative: both thus ceased to manifest any gender differentiation.<sup>[7]</sup> The loss of gender classes was part of a general decay of inflectional endings and declensional classes by the end of the 14th century.<sup>[8]</sup>

Gender loss began in the north of England; the south-east and the south-west Midlands were the most linguistically conservative regions, and Kent retained traces of gender in the 1340s.<sup>[5]</sup> Late 14th-century London English had almost completed the shift away from grammatical gender,<sup>[5]</sup> and Modern English retains no morphological agreement of words with grammatical gender.<sup>[8]</sup>



## Modern English

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Gender is no longer an inflectional category in Modern English.<sup>[9]</sup> Traces of the Old English gender system are found in the system of pronouns. Nonetheless, Modern English assumes a "natural" interpretation of gender affiliation,<sup>[10]</sup> which is based on the sex, gender identity, or perceived sexual characteristics, of the pronoun's referent. Exceptions to this generality are few and debatable, for example anaphoric she referring to ships, machines, and countries<sup>[10]</sup> (see below). Another manifestation of natural gender that continues to function in English is the use of certain nouns to refer specifically to persons or animals of a particular sex: widow/widower, postman/postwoman etc.

Linguist Benjamin Whorf described grammatical gender in English as a covert grammatical category. He argued that gender as a property inherent in nouns (rather than in their referents) is not entirely absent from modern English, citing given names such as "Jane" and words like "daughter", which are normally paired with gendered pronouns even if the speaker does not know the person being referred to.<sup>[11]</sup> Linguist Robert A. Hall Jr. argued that these are simply examples of natural gender and not grammatical gender, as daughters are always female and people named Jane are overwhelmingly likely to be female. Moreover, if a person named Jane is a man, there is nothing grammatically incorrect with saying "Jane is bringing his friends over."<sup>[12]</sup>

### Personal pronouns

The third-person singular personal pronouns are chosen according to the natural gender of their antecedent or referent. As a general rule:

- he (and its related forms him, himself, his) is used when the referent is male, or something to which male characteristics are attributed;
- she (and her, herself, hers) is used when the referent is female, or is an object personified as female<sup>[12]</sup> – this is common with vessels such as ships and airplanes, and sometimes with countries. An example is in God Bless America: "Stand beside her, and guide her through the night with a light from above."
- it (and itself, its) is used when the referent is something inanimate or intangible, a non-animal life-form such as a plant, an animal of unknown sex, or, less often, a child when the sex is unspecified or deemed unimportant.<sup>1</sup> It is also used in the interrogative for people in some phrases such as, "Who is it?".<sup>[25,26]</sup>

Pronoun agreement is generally with the natural gender of the referent (the person or thing denoted) rather than simply the antecedent (a noun or noun phrase which the pronoun replaces). For example, one might say either the doctor and his patients or the doctor and her patients, depending on one's knowledge or assumptions about the sex of the doctor in question, as the phrase the doctor (the antecedent) does not itself have any specific natural gender. Also, pronouns are sometimes used without any explicit antecedent. However, as described above (the example with child and daughter), the choice of pronoun may also be affected by the particular noun used in the antecedent.

(When the antecedent is a collective noun, such as family or team, and the pronoun refers to the members of the group denoted rather than the group as a single entity, a plural pronoun may be chosen: compare the family and its origins; the family and their breakfast-time arguments. See also synesis.)

When the referent is a person of unknown or unspecified sex, several different options are possible:

- use of he or she, he/she, s/he, etc.
- alternation or random mixture of she and he
- use of singular they (common especially in informal language)
- use of it (normally only considered when the referent is a young child)
- use of generic he (traditional, but not recommended by modern grammars)

### Transgender and non-binary people

Chosen pronouns are an element of gender expression. Many transgender people use the standard pronouns (he, she, etc.) that match their gender identity rather than their sex assigned at birth. Referring to transgender people using natural gender pronouns according to their sex deduced at birth, known as misgendering, can be perceived as extremely offensive if done deliberately, and often embarrassing or hurtful if done accidentally. Many people with a non-binary gender identity use the singular they.<sup>[13]</sup> Others accept he and/or she, alternate between he and she, use any pronouns, or prefer gender-neutral pronouns (neopronouns)<sup>[14]</sup> such as zie.<sup>[15]</sup>





## Animals

In principle, animals are triple-gender nouns, being able to take masculine, feminine and neuter pronouns. However, animals viewed as less important to humans, also known as 'lower animals', are generally referred to using it; higher (domestic) animals may more often be referred to using he and she, when their sex is known.<sup>[16]</sup> If the sex of the animal is not known, the masculine pronoun is often used with a sex-neutral meaning.<sup>[16]</sup> For example:

Person A: Ah, there's a spider

Person B: Well put him outside<sup>[16]</sup>

Animate pronouns he and she are usually applied to animals when personification and/or individuation occurs.<sup>[16]</sup> Personification occurs whenever human attributes are applied to the noun.<sup>[16]</sup> For example:

A widow bird sat mourning for her love.<sup>[16]</sup>

Specifically named animals are an example of individuation, such as Peter Rabbit or Blob the Whale.<sup>[16]</sup> In these instances, it is more likely that animate pronouns he or she will be used to represent them.<sup>[16]</sup>

These rules also apply to other triple-gender nouns, including ideas, inanimate objects, and words like infant and child.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Metaphorical gender<sup>[27,28]</sup>

Gendered pronouns are occasionally applied to sexless objects in English, such as ships, tools, or robots. This is known as metaphorical gender (as opposed to natural or grammatical gender).<sup>[17]</sup> This personification of objects is usually done for poetic effect or to show strong emotional attachment.<sup>[17]</sup>

Although the use of she and he for inanimate objects is not very frequent in Standard Modern English, it is fairly widespread in some varieties of English.<sup>[16]</sup> Gender assignment to inanimate nouns in these dialects is sometimes fairly systematic. For example, in some dialects of southwest England, masculine pronouns are used for individuated or countable matter, such as iron tools, while the neuter form is used for non-individuated matter, such as liquids, fire and other substances.<sup>[16][18]</sup>

One common use of metaphorical gender is referring to ships as she. This is the case even for ships named after men, such as HMS King George V; otherwise, the gender of inanimate objects with proper names tends to match the gender connotation of the name. The origins of this practice are not certain, and it is currently in decline and sometimes considered offensive. In modern English it is advised against by The Chicago Manual of Style,<sup>[19]</sup> New York Times Manual of Style and Usage, and The Associated Press Stylebook. The Cambridge Dictionary considers the practice "old-fashioned".<sup>[20]</sup>

The Oxford English Dictionary dates written examples of calling ships she to at least 1308 (in the Middle English period), in materials translated from French, which has grammatical gender.<sup>[21]</sup> One modern source claims that ships were treated as masculine in early English, and that this changed to feminine by the sixteenth century.<sup>[22]</sup> In the 1640 English Grammar, author Ben Jonson unambiguously documents the neuter gender "under which are comprised all inanimate things, a ship excepted: of whom we say she sails well, though the name be Hercules, or Henry, or the Prince."<sup>[23]</sup> Various folk theories on the origin include the tradition of naming of ships after goddesses, well-known women, female family members or objects of affection (though ships have male and non-personal names), the tradition of having a female figurehead on the front of the ship (though men and animals are also used as figureheads), and various justifications (many satirical) comparing the attributes of ships with women.<sup>[24]</sup>

She is also sometimes used as an alternative to it for countries, when viewed as political entities.<sup>[25]</sup>

## Other pronouns

Other English pronouns are not subject to male/female distinctions, although in some cases a distinction between animate and inanimate referents is made. For example, the word who (as an interrogative or relative pronoun) refers to a person or people, and rarely to animals (although the possessive form whose can be used as a relative pronoun even when the antecedent is inanimate), while which and what refer to inanimate things (and non-human animals). Since these pronouns function on a binary gender system, distinguishing only between animate and inanimate entities, this suggests that English has a second gender system which contrasts with the primary gender system.<sup>[16]</sup> Relative and interrogative pronouns do not encode number. This is shown in the following example:

The man who lost his head vs. the men who lost their heads<sup>[16]</sup>



Other pronouns which show a similar distinction include everyone/everybody vs. everything, no one/nobody vs. nothing, etc.

Nouns such as ship can be indicated by the feminine pronoun she but not the relative pronoun who.

Gender-specific words

Apart from pronouns, sex is mainly marked in personal names and certain titles. Many words in modern English refer specifically to people or animals of a particular sex, although sometimes the specificity is being lost (for example, duck need not refer exclusively to a female bird; cf. Donald Duck). Likewise, many feminine and masculine job titles (steward/stewardess, waiter/waitress) have undergone a process of becoming gender-neutralised in recent decades (see below).

An example of an English word that has retained gender-specific spellings is the noun-form of blond/blonde, with the former being masculine and the latter being feminine. This distinction is retained primarily in British English.<sup>[26]</sup>

Words that retain their gender-related spellings

Certain words' spellings are indicative of their original grammatical genders, which may not correspond to their natural genders, for example abscissa, which is derived from a Latin feminine word. Certain foreign expressions used in English exhibit distinctions of grammatical gender, for example tabula rasa.

Certain gender-indicative suffixes denoting humans eliminate any practical distinction between natural gender and grammatical gender (examples: -ess as in hostess, waitress, or stewardess; and -trix as in executrix or dominatrix). Some gender-related suffixes are almost never perceived as related to grammatical gender, for example -itis, a suffix meaning inflammation, which is derived from Greek feminines.<sup>[29,30]</sup>

Many words that retain their feminine endings refer to geographical regions (for example Africa) and stars (for example lucida).

Regional variations

Speakers of West Country English may use masculine (rather than neuter) pronouns with non-animate referents, as can be seen in Thomas Hardy's works.

A similar case is found in Newfoundland English. Harold Paddock observed the following in 1981:

Nouns seem to possess a well defined but covert system of grammatical gender. We may call a noun masculine, feminine or neuter depending on the pronouns which it selects in the singular. Mass or non-count nouns (such as frost, fog, water, love) are called neuter because they select the pronoun it. Count nouns divide into masculine and feminine. Female humans and most female animals, as well as all types of vehicles (land, air and sea) are feminine, in that they select the pronouns she, her. Other count nouns are masculine in that they select the pronouns he, 'en.<sup>[27]</sup>

Examples of "masculine" nouns in Newfoundland English are hat, shovel, book, and pencil; "feminine" are boat, aeroplane; "neuter" nouns include water, fog, weather, and snow.<sup>[27]</sup>

Inanimate count nouns in Newfoundland Vernacular English differ from those in Standard English in that they are either masculine or feminine. Specifically, if an inanimate count noun denotes a mobile entity, then it is feminine; otherwise such a noun is masculine. Such a gender assignment is similar to but slightly different from that in Wessex Vernacular English. In Wessex Vernacular English, a non-human count noun (be it animate or not) is regarded as masculine, for example the word cow is considered as masculine.<sup>[27]</sup>

This feature is stigmatized, widely regarded as a lower class or incorrect way of speaking. Nonetheless, one may find such a gender assignment less counterintuitive as nouns such as ship and boat can be referred to by the feminine pronoun in Standard English.<sup>[27]</sup>

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Gender neutrality in English became a growing area of interest among academics during Second Wave Feminism, when the work of structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and his theories on semiotics became better known in academic circles. By the 1960s and 1970s, post-structuralist theorists, particularly in France, brought wider attention to gender-neutrality theory, and the concept of supporting gender equality through conscious changes to language. Feminists analyzing the English language put forward their own theories about the power of language to create and enforce gender determinism and the marginalization of the feminine. Debates touched on such issues as changing the



term "stewardess" to the gender-neutral "flight attendant", "fireman" to "firefighter", "mailman" to "mail carrier", and so on. At the root of this contentiousness may have been feminists' backlash<sup>[28]</sup> against the English language's shift from "grammatical gender" to "natural gender" during the early Modern era,<sup>[28]</sup> coinciding with the spread of institutional prescriptive grammar rules in English schools. These theories have been challenged by some researchers, with attention given to additional possible social, ethnic, economic, and cultural influences on language and gender.<sup>[29]</sup> The impact on mainstream language has been limited,<sup>[30]</sup> but these theories have led to lasting changes in practice.

Features of gender-neutral language in English may include:

- Avoidance of gender-specific job titles, or caution in their use;<sup>[31]</sup>
- Avoidance of the use of man and mankind to refer to humans in general;
- Avoidance of the use of he, him and his when referring to a person of unspecified sex (see under § Personal pronouns above).

Certain naming practices (such as the use of Mrs and Miss to distinguish married and unmarried women, respectively) may also be discouraged on similar grounds. For more details and examples, see Gender neutrality in English.<sup>[31]</sup>

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4. <sup>a</sup> Curzan 2003, pp. 84, 86: "[T]he major gender shift for inanimate nouns in written texts occurs in late Old English/early Middle English, but [...] the seeds of change are already present in Old English before 1000 AD."
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19. <sup>a</sup> The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition, p. 514. 2017. ISBN 0-226-28705-X.



20. ^ Meaning of she in English
21. ^ Are Ships, Cars, and Nations Always Called 'She'?
22. ^ <https://web.archive.org/web/20100302044714/http://www.lib.mq.edu.au/all/journeys/ships/glossary.html> Glossary of Nautical Terms (As used in the late 18th and early 19th centuries)
23. ^ p. 80-81 [1] ""
24. ^ For example, the U.S. Navy history office says it was due to ships giving life and sustenance like a mother.[2] There are many popular satirical reasons and collections thereof, such as "it takes a lot of paint to keep her good-looking". [3]
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