

SEX DEVIATIONS IN THE SELECTION OF MASCULINE
AND FEMININE WORDS IN POETRYDAVID MANNING WHITE
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The question as to whether words in the English language possess valences toward "masculinity" or "femininity" is, of course, a very complex one. At one time or another, however, almost everyone has heard someone say, or perhaps has thought to himself, this word has a distinctly *feminine* sound, or that word is certainly *masculine*.

The purpose of this brief study is to examine the differences in the selection of "masculine" and "feminine" words by 100 male students and 100 female students at Bradley University. Although this is merely a preliminary study, the results seem to indicate that an examination of the subject's attitude toward words from poetry can serve as a projective technique in order to ascertain *maleness* or *femaleness* in the subject.

The students who participated in this test were given a mimeographed sheet of paper with the three poems. The authors of the poems were, obviously, not given. The students were asked to designate whether they thought the poem was written by a man or woman. They were asked, secondly to list any words, which, in their opinion were masculine or feminine sounding. They were asked to list the masculine or feminine words which had been instrumental in determining for them that the writer of the poem was a man or woman.

The same students who took the poetry test were later given a second test. This is a preliminary test by Arthur Weider, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Bradley University, which sets up a masculinity-femininity scale. This is done by filling out a work-interest blank, which is a disguised occupational preference blank, wherein the subject encircles L (Like) or D (Dislike) for a list of twenty occupations. The subjects are asked to indicate in this list those which he likes or dislikes. A previous study of homosexuals incarcerated at Rikers Island, a penal institution in New York harbor, for asocial behavior, as well as effeminate and homosexual subjects, demonstrated in a statistically reliable manner that certain occupations, e.g., interior decorator, dancer, window dresser, etc, were chosen by these homosexuals with great frequency. This fact is utilized in the Weider scale for the purpose of deriving conclusions concerning the individual's ability to accept the male patterns of our society.

Examining the selection of words from the poetry in a general way, it is interesting to note that in the list of feminine words chosen by male subjects the words *lovely* and *desired* have high frequencies, while neither word was in the corresponding female list. The strong feminine connotation of the word *sea* for mate

subjects was not shared by the women. In only one word did both sexes concur; both chose *lilies* as the most feminine word.

Perhaps more significant are the female choices in this respect. The female choices of the feminine words suggest the spring season of the year. The period of growth and verdancy is perhaps strongest in the female mind as the symbol of fertility and motherhood. On the other hand, the female choice of masculine words reveals an almost diametric concept, one that suggests winter and hiemal dormancy.

In both groups the word *storms* had a very high masculine frequency, as did the words *hail* and *wind*.

How can such word choices serve as a projective technique in determining maleness or femaleness in the subject? To validate the frequency lists the individual tests, i.e. selecting the words from the poetry, were compared with the same subject's score on the Weider masculinity-femininity scale. For example, subject A, female, 19 years old, had an M-F score of F-5, which indicates an adequate acceptance of female patterns. The words that she listed as feminine included *lilies*, *silently* and *spring*; her masculine choices included *storms* and *death*. In only one word did she go over to the male lists. That was her choice of *sea* as a feminine word.

Another female subject, age 20, had a very high F score on the F-M scale, an F 22, indicating a very strong acceptance of the female patterns and/or rejection of the male patterns. The four words she selected, *lilies*, *green swell* (in her femin-

ine selections) and *storms* and *scalding* (in her masculine selections) are exclusively in the female frequency lists.

Another female subject, age 22, had a score of M-8 on the M-F scale, indicating a deviation from the acceptance of female patterns. Accordingly, one could expect a selection on her part of several words from the male frequency lists. Of the five words she listed, two of them came from the male lists, *sea* and *desired*, and the other three words were those which were common to both groups, i.e., *lilies*, *storms* and *wind*. She chose no words from the female frequency lists.

Collating the individual male tests with the same subject's M-F scale produced similar results to the cases which I have just listed. It should be understood, however, that there were several cases, both male and female, in which the words selected did not follow the general trend. Although they showed a good acceptance of maleness or femaleness on the M-F tests, the subjects selected words from the opposite sex's frequency list. However, it may be significant to point out that a very large percentage of the subjects had a close correlation between their M-F scales and the words which they selected as masculine and feminine. Of the women tested 78 percent chose words from the frequency lists in proportion to their M-F scales, and 69 percent of the men did the same.

As I have suggested, this study is merely the preliminary step in a very complex problem. If, however, further testing, perhaps with different and better poems, continues to indicate that there is a strong cor-

relation between the M-F scale and the words selected, a test can be devised which will serve as a projective technique to further ascertain acceptance or deviation from the male or female patterns of our society.

POEMS USED IN STUDY

1

I have desired to go
Where spring not fall,
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail.
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the haven dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

2

White sky, over the hemlocks bowed with snow
Saw you not at the beginning of evening the antlered
buck and his doe
Standing in the orchard? I saw them. I saw them
suddenly go,
Tails up, with long leaps lovely and slow,
Over the stone-wall into the wood of hemlocks bowed
with snow.

Now lies he here, his wild blood scalding the snow.

How strange a thing is death, bringing to his knees,
bringing to his antlers,
The buck in the snow.

How strange a thing, . . . a mile away by now, it may be,
Under the heavy hemlocks that as the moments pass
Shift their loads a little, letting fall a feather of
snow—

Life, looking out attentive from the eyes of the doe.

—Edna St. Vincent Millay

3

Now close the windows and hush all the fields;
If the trees must, let them silently toss;
No bird is singing now, and if there is,
Be it my loss.

It will be long ere the marshes resume.

It will be long ere the earliest bird.

So close all the windows and not hear the wind,

And see all wind-stirred.

—Robert Frost

Lists of the five most frequently selected words in each category chosen by male and female students.

<i>Male Students</i>		<i>Female Students</i>	
Masculine Words	Feminine Words	Masculine Words	Feminine Words
1. wind (41)	1. lilies (54)	1. storms (57)	1. lilies (48)
2. storms (38)	2. lovely (51)	2. hail (46)	2. spring (41)
3. hail (33)	3. desired (42)	3. scalding (39)	3. green swell (36)
4. snow (30)	4. sea (37)	4. death (33)	4. silently (29)
5. blood (27)	5. feather (31)	5. wind (28)	5. feather (17)