

4-14-2015

# Gender & Dialogue Differences in American Novels

Breanna Fehlman  
*Ouachita Baptist University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english\\_class\\_publications](http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english_class_publications)



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Fehlman, Breanna, "Gender & Dialogue Differences in American Novels" (2015). *English Class Publications*. Paper 6.  
[http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english\\_class\\_publications/6](http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english_class_publications/6)

This Class Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Class Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact [mortensona@obu.edu](mailto:mortensona@obu.edu).

Breanna Fehlman

Ms. Pittman

American Novel

14 April 2015

### Gender & Dialogue Differences in American Novels

In your favorite book, do men talk like men and women talk like women? Or is it a mixture of the two? While many readers may not consciously notice the way that characters speak, those same readers might subconsciously pick up on the difference, or lack of differences, in the way those characters speak. In some of the many famous American novels, the characters, regardless of gender, talk like whatever sex the author is, as it is hard to write like a gender that is not your own. When exploring the differences between the genders, perhaps one of the most important differences, and the easiest to spot, is the way that each gender speaks. Luckily, there is a computer program that can look at men vs. women speech patterns and interpret them electronically, giving many categories for comparison between the two. When looking at the differences between three women from two famous works written by male authors, Caddy in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Vivian and Carmen Sternwood in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, and two women from two works written by female authors, Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Ivy in Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*, one would expect the difference between the language to be stark.<sup>1</sup> However, one would not expect the results that can be seen. In fact, in most categories, the male writers actually write in a more conventionally female way than the actual females do. That is Caddy, Carmen, and Vivian actually talk in a more feminine way than Edna and Ivy, despite being created by males. While examining these unusual differences between the females and males, an interesting example comes to mind: perhaps the male authors, who were trying to sound female, actually accomplish this because the actual female authors, who were trying to create advanced,

---

<sup>1</sup> These particular works were of interest to me due to a special study where we discussed these particular books, in addition to several other that are considered classic American novels.

“ahead-of-their-time” women, attempted to sound more masculine, as masculinity is seen as more powerful than femininity.

### The Secret Life of Pronouns

Using James W. Pennebaker’s book *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us* and the program called LIWC (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count) that he created to analyze text from different authors, I looked at the dialogue spoken by the aforementioned characters in order to analyze what they say. Pennebaker’s book stresses the importance of pronouns, which would probably not be seen as the most important part of speech by many readers. However, as he noted, a person can learn a lot about someone through his or her use of pronouns. While someone might try to change his or her writing style, he or she cannot change his or her use of pronouns and Pennebaker developed a program that can take samples from people and tell what samples of writing have in common or even whether they were written by the same person. The LIWC program, which is pronounced “Luke,” is “text analysis software” that can analyze “the degree to which people use different categories of words across a wide variety of tests” (LIWC). After the program reads the text, it gives numbers in 80 different categories, such as pronouns, verbs, and adverbs, counting the rate at which each snippet of text uses words in each category. The numbers the program gives can be used to see how high/low the rate of each word is used and can be used to compare or contrast the results from two or more different authors (LIWC). After putting in random dialogue from each of my chosen novels, the results were unexpected.

### The Results

Interestingly, where women should use first-person singular pronouns more, according to Pennebaker, the opposite is true in the case of Chopin and Smith (Pennebaker 25). The two female characters written by female authors use *I* words at a similar or smaller rate (3.07 for Edna and 0.31 for Ivy) than the female characters whose dialogue was written by men (7.25 for Caddy, 6.12 for Carmen, and 3.51 for Vivian).

Women are also more likely to use more cognitive words (such as *understand, know, think, because, reason*, and other such words) than men, explains Pennebaker (25). In this case, all of the characters fit, except for Ivy. Edna has a score of 19.74 in using cognitive words, which is higher but still within the same range as those used by the male-created characters, such as Caddy's score of 18.12, Carmen's 14.29, and Vivian's 14.91. Ivy's dialogue, which should be in the same range as Edna's, is a very low 1.85. Yet again, Ivy is the surprising character.

Social words (such as *friend, neighbor, humans, adult, or boy/girl*) are also used at a higher rate in women than in men, as Pennebaker's studies showed. Ivy's score is, once again, very low at 0.31, suggesting that she almost never uses social words. This difference is especially apparent when I looked at the other characters' social words, both those created by women and men. Edna uses social words at a rate of 19.30, which is extremely close to the rates of Caddy (13.04), Carmen (21.43), and Vivian (20.18). These findings could suggest that Ivy did not use words such as friends often and that she may have been more likely to use words that do not appear as social words, such as family, children, or husband. Because Caddy, Carmen, Vivien, and Edna talk more about themselves than their families, these findings make sense, as they are more likely to talk about friends or themselves. However, Ivy is arguably the most devoted to her family (at least throughout the majority of the novel), so it would make sense that she would talk more about her husband and children than about herself.

There are several other categories dealing with words women are more likely to use where all of the characters are similar enough to be comparable, including verb use (Edna's 13.60, Ivy's 13.58, Caddy's 24.64, Carmen's 21.43, and Vivian's 25.44), anxiety (0, 0.62, 0, 0, and 0.88), negations (3.07, 4.32, 4.35, 3.06, and 3.51), and certainty words (0.88, 0.62, 0, 1.82, and 0.88). Looking at each character, she would probably each use a variety of words from each of these categories. Anxiety words, such as *worried, fearful, or nervous*, negations, such as *no, not, or never*, and certainty words, such as *always or never*, are all similar in characteristics and would be expected to occur in each of

the novels chosen. Verbs, while used by everyone, tend to be used to a higher degree by women and this is actually the case in the ratings, with the characters created by men actually scoring higher in this category. Yet again, the characters created by men speak more feminine in some ways.

Men use articles (words such as a, an, and the) at a higher rate than women, which is displayed in Edna's relatively low use of such words (3.51) compared with the higher rates of articles used by Carmen (7.15) and Vivian (3.15). However, the characters of Caddy and Ivy are opposite of what one would assume they would be. Caddy uses a relatively low score of 2.17 whereas Ivy uses the extremely large score of 19.44. Ivy's high usage of articles could be due to several factors, including the possibility that the education she received could have made her talk more like a man in some ways because most education was given to men at this time, especially in the area in which she lived. Perhaps most interesting is Ivy's use of swear words, which is more than all of the other characters combined. This is more indicative of a male writer than a female.

While all of the other characters use first-person plural words (we words) about the same (at a very low rate of 0 to 0.88), Ivy uses we words at a rate of 4.01. This could indicate that she does not come across as truthful in her letters (as we is assumed by most to be less honest) or it could be a product of her environment's focus on the importance of family over the self.

### Explanations & Arguments

In almost all of the categories, Faulkner and Chandler actually write more like what is considered typical "female writing" than the writers considered who are actually female. A possible reason for this could be that, while Faulkner and Chandler were creating characters that were stereotypical "women" of the time, Chopin and Smith were writing female characters that were way ahead of their time, in terms of feminism and dialogue. Perhaps Chopin and Smith felt that they had to alter the dialogue of the females to seem more masculine in order to get their respective points about women across. Adding in the fact that Chopin wrote her story in 1899 and Smith wrote hers

in 1988, almost 100 years apart, makes Chopin's writing even more significant and ahead of her time, as there are so many years between the two authors.

The characters of Caddy, Carmen, and Vivian can be considered typical female characters in the times in which their perspective novels were released. Caddy is promiscuous (which was discouraged in women in the 1920's) and, because of this, she ruins her entire family. Even though she loves and cares for her family, it is because of her actions that her brother Quentin kills himself, her other brother Jason loses a job, and the family is forced into taking on the burden and shame of Caddy's illegitimate daughter, Miss Quentin.

Both the Compton family and Faulkner himself treat this illegitimacy and promiscuity with great shame. As she is a woman, it is alright for the family, the author, and even the reader to shame Caddy for behaving this way when, most likely, her brothers would have been "just being boys" or even congratulated for the same behavior. Thus she speaks like a woman because Caddy and the Compton family feel the shame of Caddy's deeds and the reader understands the obvious message of the inappropriateness of women doing what Caddy did.

Raymond Chandler's treatment of Vivian and Carmen is similar to Faulkner's treatment of Caddy, but in different manners. Carmen is perhaps the most complex character of the bunch, as she seems like a fully functioning, if slightly odd, member of society until Marlowe discovers at the end of the novel that she killed her sister's husband for not sleeping with her. Like Caddy, Carmen is promiscuous, perhaps because she desperate for love or perhaps she is just "crazy," according to the men in her life and even her sister. However, this promiscuity leads her to murder a man simply because he did not want to give her this love. Yet again, the reader sees the shame that Carmen causes her family, especially her sister, who is trying to deal with her husband's murder and the fact that Carmen killed him. Carmen's promiscuity leads the family into shame and disrepair and, again, she talks like a female.

While Vivian is not promiscuous, she is crazy in a way because she believes that she will be able to save her sister from going to jail/a mental institution and save her family from that shame. She even goes so far as to help her sister cover up the murder of her own husband in order to protect her ailing father and her emotionally unstable sister. Vivian brings more harm to her family through her actions as her father hires Marlowe and soon finds out the truth that Vivian tried to hide, in addition to finding out many other family secrets. Thus, through Vivian's deception (another trait women were discouraged from having), she ruins her family's reputation and, because of this, Chandler's gives her the dialogue of a woman.

After looking at the extremely different characters created by females, it is interesting to note the drastic differences between the male-created characters and the more adventurous (and, perhaps in some ways, more stereotypically male-acting) female characters. Edna is promiscuous and even commits adultery. But, she is not treated in the same way by Chopin as Caddy or Carmen by Faulkner or Chandler, respectively. In the novel, Chopin handles her main character with the grace and dignity that would have been afforded to "pure" women in works released in that time (such as when Edna says, "If your attentions to any married women here were ever offered with any intention of being convincing, you would not be the gentleman we all know you to be, and you would be unfit to associate with the wives and daughters of the people who trust you") (Chopin 63). By letting Edna keep her dignity, Chopin is showing readers that women should be allowed to make the same mistakes that men were. Similar to Caddy's situation, if Edna's husband had done these things instead, society would not have shamed him or thought badly of him. However, because Edna was a woman (especially in the Creole culture that she had married into), she was considered her husband's property and was not allowed to make these sort of mistakes. But, as Chopin was trying to demonstrate that women should not be considered property and should be allowed to make their own decisions, even if they are married, Edna talks more like a man in some ways because masculine dialogue may have helped to get across Chopin's point more than feminine dialogue.

In yet another way, Ivy is different from the aforementioned women in that she is not promiscuous. However, she does have many men wanting to marry her. She chooses a mineworker instead of her wealthy suitor, due to her love for the first and fear/disdain for the second. This was not a choice that her family expected or supported, especially at first. Smith shows, through Ivy's choice, that women should be able to choose whom they should marry because they love the person, not based on who is more socially acceptable.

Ivy also has an affair and even leaves her family for a while, which was not socially acceptable, especially in the backwards Appalachian Mountain area her family lived in. While she does eventually return to her family, Ivy initially makes the choice to abandon her husband and children in favor of living in the woods with a bee farmer. While this ends up being a huge mistake, as one of her children dies while she is frolicking in the woods, Smith makes the point that Ivy should be allowed to choose to make this mistake, just as men would be allowed to, even though she ultimately regrets it.

While she may not have as serious "social sins" as the other women discussed, Ivy had the biggest number of actions that society would question. In addition to her "questionable" choice in men and her affair with a younger man, she also receives more education than most women (and, at times, seems haughty about this), spends her time reading, and even has an illegitimate child as a teenager. All of these actions, while not all bad mistakes, were not considered proper for a woman to be doing. Perhaps this is why Ivy is the character whose language is most unlike a typical woman's. In creating such a rebellious and unfamiliar female character, Smith used non-feminine language in order to make her a stronger-sounding character.

### Conclusion

Someone might wonder about the importance of LIWC and doing these kinds of studies. While some studies that are done with this program are interesting, there are others that are informative as well as interesting. One such study was completed in 2015, when researchers were

able to finally identify the play *Double Falsehood* as written by Shakespeare (Anders). *Double Falsehood's* place in the Shakespeare canon had been doubted for many years, but, due to the use of Pennebaker's studies and program, researchers were able to conclusively identify this play as being one written by the most famous playwright of all time. Yet again, this identification was made based on the pronouns used in the play (Anders). Because it is impossible for a person to change his pronoun use, these researchers were able to compare *Double Falsehood's* use of pronouns and compare it with Shakespeare's, proving that they are a match. These results are not just interesting, but they also prove the usefulness of this program: we can possibly use this program to identify the authorship of many other pieces of work that have been lost or whose authorship has been disputed. Studies like the Shakespeare one show how vital the LIWC program can be.

Whether using the program to provide interesting information or to find/confirm the author of unknown documents, the LIWC program has many uses. In my case, it provided evidence for a theory that I would have never guessed: that, in many instances, the male writers actually write more feminine than the females. This study could be reproduced using other novels in order to see if these findings extend to other authors as well.

## Works Cited

Anders, Helen. "Computer Finds Lost Shakespeare Play." *The Daily Beast*. 13 Apr. 2015. Web. 23 Apr. 2015.

Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. (1939). New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. (1899). New York: Avon Books, 1972. Print.

Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. (1929). New York: Vintage International, 1990. Print.

Pennebaker, James W. *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us*. London: Bloomsbury P, 2013. Print.

Pennebaker, J. W., C. K. Chung, M. Ireland, A. Gonzales, and R. J. Booth. *The development and psychometric properties of LIWC2007. [Software manual]*. Austin: LIWC, 2007. Web. 23 Apr. 2015.

Smith, Lee. *Fair and Tender Ladies: A Novel*. New York: Berkley Books, 1988. Print.

"What is LIWC?" *LIWC.net*. Pennebaker Conglomerates, Inc. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.