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Gender and genre: the empirical recognition of “conversational narrator” in women’s fiction

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Abstract • This article examines the interplay between gender and narrative form, with particular attention to the identification and function of the conversational narrator in women’s writing. Drawing on the experimental paradigm developed by Bortolussi and Dixon, this article reports the findings of two exploratory empirical studies designed to assess how selected narrative features influence the perception of a female conversational narrator. Employing a mixed between- and within-subjects experimental design, participants read literary excerpts manipulated along two principal dimensions: linguistic gender markers and narrative perspective. Measures included author recognition, narrative transportation, and message evaluation. The results contribute to a more precise understanding of the narrative strategies and compositional conventions associated with the macro-genre of women’s fiction.

Keywords • Gender; Genre; Conversational narrator; Focalization; Women’s literature

Abstract • Questo articolo esamina l'intreccio tra genere e forma narrativa, con particolare attenzione all'identificazione del narratore conversazionale nella scrittura delle donne. Sulla scia del paradigma sperimentale sviluppato da Bortolussi e Dixon, l'articolo presenta i risultati di due studi empirici sulla letteratura femminile volti a valutare come specifiche caratteristiche narrative influenzino la percezione di un narratore conversazionale femminile. Adottando un disegno sperimentale misto, i partecipanti hanno letto estratti letterari manipolati lungo due dimensioni principali: marcatori linguistici di genere e prospettiva narrativa e risposto a domande sul riconoscimento dell'autore, il grado di trasporto narrativo e la valutazione del messaggio. I risultati contribuiscono a una comprensione più precisa delle strategie narrative e delle convenzioni compositive associate al macro-genere della narrativa femminile.

Parole chiave • Gender; Genere; Narratore conversazionale; Focalizzazione; Letteratura femminile

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I. Gender issues and the construction of the feminine as textual genre

The concept of the feminine as a textual genre emerges not from the biological identity or empirical gender of the author, but from the dynamic interplay between textual features and interpretive practices. Rather than being a fixed property inscribed in the text, the feminine is constituted through a semiotic relation in which readers, critics, and cultural codes interact. In this perspective, femininity is not a textual essence but a reading effect produced through associative patterns of meaning, and through stylistic, thematic, and rhetorical cues. These cues are inherently unstable, as their interpretation is mediated by historically contingent gender norms, cultural grammars, and ideological formations.

Contemporary feminist criticism, therefore, does not approach feminine writing as a homogeneous or unified corpus. Instead, it conceptualizes femininity as a performative and relational category. A text may be interpreted as feminine due to its affective orientation, its relational dynamics, its lexical and syntactic texture, or its alignment with culturally coded domains such as intimacy, care, and interiority. Crucially, this performative quality resists reduction to authorial intent or essentialist notions of gendered expression. Rather, it emerges from an ongoing semiotic negotiation that implicates textual structures, institutional discourses, and readerly engagement.

At a semiotic level, feminine textuality may be understood as an assemblage of isotopies: recurring semantic patterns or connotative clusters that orient the reader’s interpretive trajectory. These patterns are not necessarily thematic; they often involve modes of enunciation, lexical selection, syntactic rhythm, and figurative language. In this framework, feminine textuality does not aim to “represent” women *per se*; rather, it performs a feminized mode of textual labor, identifiable through specific stylistic and rhetorical configurations.

Teresa De Lauretis (1987) offers a related insight by conceptualizing gender not as referent or content, but as a technology of the self-inscribed in discourse. In this view, feminine textuality is the result of a negotiation between embodied experience and discursive positioning. It is less an ontological given than an articulation – a process through which subjectivities are constituted, contested, and mediated. Narratives read as feminine frequently deploy strategies that foreground affect, vulnerability, multiplicity, and resistance to linearity or closure. These characteristics are not inherently “female”, but have been culturally coded as such through a long history of gendered reading practices.

As shown by Lyons & Taksá (1992), women as readers and writers have historically been directed toward specific literary domains – such as epistolary writing, domestic fiction, or romance – which have contributed to the construction of an imagined “feminine” literary sphere. These domains are far from neutral; they are saturated with assumptions about taste, education, emotional capacity, and social function. As such, femininity in literature is not merely a matter of content or style, but also of the sociocultural conditions governing production and reception.

Scholars such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1985) mapped the anxieties surrounding female authorship, while Gayatri Spivak (1981) exposed the limitations of Western feminist discourse in its engagements with postcolonial and subaltern voices.

In this evolving critical landscape, feminine textuality has increasingly been read as a site of contradiction and multiplicity. Demaria (2003), for example, underscores the epistemological instability of gendered discourse and cautions against codifying feminine writing into rigid typologies. What is interpreted as “feminine” in one context may be read differently in another, depending on the cultural codes and interpretive frameworks activated by the reader. As such, the gender of a text is not an intrinsic property but a contingent, provisional effect of reading.

This becomes especially evident in the reception of narratives that deliberately subvert or blur conventional gender codes. When texts associated with feminine writing adopt experimental or non-normative forms, they can disrupt readerly expectations and generate cognitive dissonance. Readers may be compelled to revise their assumptions about narrative voice, authority, and coherence. In this context, the metaphor of the “reading window” becomes salient: readers do not merely decode textual information but project their own cultural schemas, desires, and experiences onto the narrative. These projections are often guided by gendered expectations that shape how voice, character, and plot are interpreted.

Importantly, feminine textuality is not confined to female authorship. Male writers may produce texts that are perceived as feminine, just as female writers may employ narrative strategies typically associated with masculinity. The distinction lies not in the author’s empirical identity, but in the interplay between textual configurations and readerly inferences. This raises important questions about the politics of attribution: How and why do readers assign gendered value to certain textual forms? What ideological frameworks shape these attributions? And in what ways do such frameworks reinforce or destabilize dominant models of gender, authorship, and narrative form?

These questions point to a dense web of symbolic associations. Feminine writing is often aligned with the private sphere, affect, interiority, and embodiment – domains historically marginalized within the male-dominated literary canon. By centering these elements, texts read as feminine challenge dominant aesthetic paradigms that valorize objectivity, detachment, and universality. They instead foreground situated knowledge and legitimize emotional and subjective experience as valid sources of narrative authority. In doing so, they reveal the ideological underpinnings of literary value itself, showing how judgments of form, style, and meaning are always already gendered.

2. Narrative communication and the conversational narrator: revisiting the implied author through a feminist-semiotic lens

Narrative communication has long been conceptualized as a triadic model linking author, narrator, and reader. Wayne Booth’s (1961) introduction of the *implied author* disrupted this linear model by positing a constructed figure responsible for a text’s formal choices and value system – distinct from the empirical author and embedded within the narrative itself. More recently, cognitive narratology – particularly the work of Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) – has refined this notion by proposing the concept of the *conversational narrator*: a figure readers infer as their communicative partner in a cooperative act of narration. This model foregrounds the reader’s active role in constructing narrative meaning through interpretive inferences based on linguistic, rhetorical, and generic cues.

Feminist-semiotic perspectives offer a productive reorientation of this cognitive framework, emphasizing that the construction of the conversational narrator is not ideologically neutral. Rather, it is shaped by gendered and culturally encoded expectations. While Bortolussi and Dixon frame the conversational narrator as an entity inferred through coherence, relevance, and communicative intentionality, feminist theory draws attention to the implicit gendering of these inferences. Readers are not simply engaging with textual structure, but with a semiotic landscape saturated with sociocultural codes.

Within the psychonarratological paradigm, the conversational narrator is neither a character nor a direct extension of the author; instead, it is a cognitively constructed figure readers form through mind-reading practices. Readers attribute beliefs, intentions, affective traits, and even personality to this narrative voice based on stylistic elements such as register, focalization, evaluative language, and modes of address. Gender frequently becomes part of this construction – not as an explicit textual signal, but as a probabilistic inference grounded in genre conventions and cultural schemas.

Feminist narratology critically interrogates the assumption that this inferential process is objective or universal. Instead, it highlights how readers' gendered assumptions guide their interpretation of narrative voice. Features such as emotional tone, narrative empathy, domestic or intimate settings, and internal focalization often prompt the reader to attribute femininity to the narrator – even in the absence of any definitive gender markers. This attribution emerges from the persistent cultural alignment of affective or relational narration with femininity, a phenomenon rarely problematized in traditional narratological models.

The implications of this dynamic are considerable. First, they underscore that narrative communication is not only inferential but also ideologically and culturally situated. The figure of the conversational narrator is always constructed within a network of symbolic associations, and gendered expectations are among the most deeply ingrained. Second, this process of attribution constitutes a critical site where readers project, infer, and negotiate gender meanings – even, paradoxically, in moments of textual ambiguity or silence. The absence of gender cues may, in fact, intensify the activation of stereotype-based interpretive habits.

This dynamic aligns with feminist accounts of reading that foreground embodiment, positionality, and power. In De Lauretis's terms, the narrator functions as a *technē* of gender – a discursive apparatus through which social knowledge about gender is enacted and reinforced. The conversational narrator thus becomes a semiotic construct shaped by affective cues, rhetorical patterns, and intersubjective dynamics. This is especially pronounced in genres that privilege intimacy and subjective interiority – such as autobiographical fiction, epistolary narratives, or stream-of-consciousness prose – where the gender of the voice becomes a central interpretive concern, even when deliberately withheld.

The gender attribution process theorized in this model has also been empirically tested. Research shows that when the author's identity is concealed, readers nonetheless make consistent gendered inferences based on narrative style and thematic content. These inferences correlate strongly with culturally coded expectations regarding masculine and feminine expression. For example, narratives emphasizing action, control, or distance are frequently read as masculine, while those marked by introspection, emotional nuance, or relational complexity are read as feminine. The construction of the conversational narrator thus intersects with broader ideologies of gender performance and authorship.

One particularly revealing dimension of this process involves the narrator's use of direct address. When narrators engage the reader through rhetorical questions, self-reflexive commentary, or expressions of doubt, they are often anthropomorphized and assigned a gender

identity. This mechanism is underpinned by Grice's (1975) cooperative principles – sincerity, relevance, clarity, and informativeness – which establish the narrator as a trustworthy communicative partner. When these principles are enacted through emotionally expressive or relational discourse, a feminine voice is often inferred; when the tone is assertive, ironic, or authoritative, the narrator is more likely to be read as male. These interpretive habits highlight the deep entanglement of reading practices with social cognition and gender normativity.

From this standpoint, feminist narratology urges us to reconceptualize the narrator not as a disembodied narrative function, but as a co-constructed and ideologically inflected figure. The narrator becomes a discursive position through which identity, power, and gender are negotiated in the act of reading. Traditional narratology has tended to treat the narrator as a transparent vehicle for plot delivery; feminist-semiotic approaches instead foreground the narrator as a contested site of meaning-making – a locus where authorial authority, cultural codes, and reader projection converge.

Moreover, this framework enables a rethinking of narrative address as dialogic encounter. If the narrator is a communicative partner, we must ask: what gendered assumptions shape our expectations of this partner? How do these assumptions frame the way we interpret voice, credibility, and intention? In raising such questions, the feminist-semiotic model not only exposes the politics of narrative engagement but also reframes reading as a socially situated and affectively charged interpretive act.

3. Narrative gender cues and reader inference: empirical approaches to the recognition of the narrator's gender

3.1 Inference and Misattribution: Gender Reading and Reader Bias

The perception of gender within narrative discourse is strongly shaped by implicit reader assumptions, even when no explicit gender markers are provided. Monika Fludernik's research ([1999] 2017) on gender attribution in fiction illustrates how readers draw on culturally embedded schemas when interpreting narrative voice. Her empirical study of Gabriel Josipovici's *The Bird Cage* – a text that deliberately withholds any gender cues – revealed that the majority of readers, irrespective of the author's known identity, identified the narrator as female. This finding challenges the assumption that readers default either to the author's biological sex or to their own gender identity when no other information is available.

Instead, Fludernik's results highlight the central role of cultural frames and prototypical narrative patterns in shaping gender inferences. Readers interpreted the narrator as feminine due to the story's emphasis on emotional abandonment, domestic space, and caregiving – all themes culturally coded as feminine. Even when reading a text authored by a man, participants projected femininity onto the narrator based on the affective and relational texture of the story. This suggests that narrative content and rhetorical style may override biographical or paratextual indicators in processes of gender attribution.

Fludernik's analysis of additional gender-indeterminate texts – such as *Love Child*, *Sphinx*, and *Written on the Body* – further demonstrates how ambiguous gender representations provoke a wide range of reader interpretations. These texts function as experimental platforms for examining the mechanisms of gender inference. The more readers encounter ambiguity, the more actively they seek interpretive resolution by relying on contextual signals – such as sexual behavior, character roles, metaphorical imagery, and cultural

references. The act of attributing gender thus becomes a way of closing interpretive gaps, even when the narrative itself resists such closure.

This tendency exposes a paradox inherent in interpretive freedom: when faced with indeterminacy, readers often fall back on stereotype-driven assumptions. Rather than embracing ambiguity, they mobilize normative scripts to stabilize the text's meaning. This interpretive reflex reflects both the resilience of gender norms and their vulnerability when challenged by texts that intentionally blur or withhold gender identity. The desire for resolution becomes a site of ideological tension, where the reader's own subject position and cultural conditioning shape the interpretive outcome.

Ultimately, Fludernik's research also suggest that gender attribution in narrative is less an act of decoding than of projection. Readers bring with them a repertoire of cultural scripts – expectations about who expresses emotion, who nurtures, who suffers – and these expectations guide their interpretive engagements. From a strictly empirical perspective, the present suggestion – or, more precisely, the underlying scientific hypothesis – fails to find unequivocal confirmation. While it is plausible that phenomena of projection operate during the act of reading, such processes appear to be less immediate and more profoundly mediated by cultural frameworks. Gender identity does not directly determine the projection of one's own gender onto the author or narrator; rather, it conditions the projection of a culturally inflected standpoint, a standpoint that is itself inherently gendered. Narrative ambiguity thus functions as a mirror for gendered epistemologies, revealing the ways in which texts become spaces for the performance, negotiation, and contestation of cultural anxieties around identity.

3.2 The Conversational Narrator and the Construction of Gendered Voice

Bortolussi and Dixon's theory of the conversational narrator offers a cognitive model for understanding how readers infer the narrator's identity in the absence of explicit characterization.

Readers perceive the narrator not merely as a conduit for plot, but as an intentional presence – someone with beliefs, attitudes, and a communicative style. This perceived presence is often anthropomorphized, and gender is among the first social traits readers assign, based on narrative tone, vocabulary, syntax, and rhetorical stance.

When the narrator's gender is not made explicit, readers default to probabilistic reasoning informed by genre familiarity and social schemas. A romantic plot, introspective tone, or domestic setting may trigger the inference of a female narrator; a terse, action-oriented style may suggest a male voice. These assumptions are not objective assessments but socially conditioned responses.

This has significant implications for both narrative strategy and reception. Writers who construct gender-indeterminate narrators may do so to expose the reader's unconscious assumptions and challenge the reflex of gender categorization. In these cases, the narrator becomes not only a structural function but a rhetorical tool for generating metacognitive reflection. The reader is invited – or compelled – to become aware of their own interpretive habits and the cultural scripts that guide them.

To elucidate the relationship between readers' cognitive processes and the textual cues that guide and stimulate them, Bortolussi and Dixon draw on the narratological category – admittedly ambiguous – of “focalization.”

Debates on focalization have long hinged on Genette's foundational distinction between *who sees* and *who speaks*. This separation permits configurations in which the narrator enunciates from the perceptual standpoint of a character. Sanders and Redeker (1996) conceptualize this as the narrator's ability to present a character's vision without letting the

character narrate, embedding a character's point of view within the narrator's discursive reality.

Despite its intuitive appeal, focalization remains difficult to define and operationalize, with narratologists divided between text-centered typologies and more interpretive approaches. O'Neil (1992) emphasized the reader's active role in constructing focalization, while Fludernik (1993) reframed it as an inherently interpretative rather than purely textual category. These perspectives shift attention from the text as a static repository of cues to the reader's dynamic process of inference-making.

However, such models have often relied on speculative constructs of "ideal" or "implied" readers, producing circular arguments in which textual features are both the evidence for, and the result of, presumed competencies. A more robust framework treats the agent of focalization as a cognitive construct in the reader's mind and insists on empirical grounding for claims about reading practices – systematically distinguishing between textual features and the interpretive operations they prompt.

Reframing the focalization debate through a psychonarratological lens, Bortolussi and Dixon shift analytic attention from ontological categories to the reader's active construction of perceptual information. Narrative discourse, in this view, furnishes not a determinate perspectival frame but a constellation of overlapping constraints, here systematized into three principal domains: descriptive reference frames (relative or external vantage points embedded in spatial description), positional constraints (limitations on the notional location of a perceiver), and perceptual attributions (cues enabling the assignment of perceptual knowledge to narrators or characters). By differentiating these textual features from the interpretive operations they invite, the model disentangles focalization from anthropomorphic notions of "narrators who see," locating it instead in the reader's constructive activity.

Within this framework, the narrator emerges as a cognitive construct analogous to a conversational partner, endowed – by default assumptions – with knowledge of the story world, communicative intentionality, and cooperative rationality. Perceptually salient descriptions operate as markers of such knowledge. When these markers are systematically anchored to a single character – *specific perceptual access* – readers tend to generate narrator-character associations, whereby the narrator inherits the character's demographic and social profile, and the character acquires the narrator's perceived reliability and authority.

An experiment tested this hypothesis using ten short stories, on diverse topics, each presented from two distinct perspectives: that of a male character and that of a female character. A mixed between – within design was implemented, whereby participants, in randomized order, read only one version of each story, with male and female perspective narratives intermixed. Two versions of each story differed only in whether perceptual access favored the male or female character. Twenty undergraduates rated each character's correctness, rationality, perceived authorial sympathy, and inferred author gender. Consistent with predictions, focalizing a character increased attributions of rationality, sympathy, and shared gender with the presumed author; effects on judgments of correctness were weaker but aligned. These findings support the claim that sustained perceptual access fosters narrator-character associations that shape readers' attributional judgments.

3.3 Free Indirect Discourse and the Blurring of Gendered Voice

Free indirect discourse (FID) introduces an additional layer of complexity to gendered voice construction by merging the narrator's voice with the character's interior language. This narrative technique blurs the boundary between enunciation and subjectivity, making it difficult to determine whose voice is being heard – the narrator's, the characters, or some

hybrid of the two. As such, FID destabilizes fixed notions of narrative agency and challenges the reader's capacity to assign a stable gender to the speaker.

Scholars such as Lanser (1995; 2014) and Banfield (1973) have noted that the interpretation of FID is deeply influenced by the perceived gender of both the narrator and the character. When FID is associated with a female character or narrator, it is often read as emotionally expressive, introspective, and intimate qualities traditionally aligned with femininity. When associated with male figures, FID may be interpreted as cerebral, ironic, or distanced. These readings are not derived from grammatical structures but from cultural codes that guide reader expectations.

Cohn (1978) and Segal (1995) further show that the gendering of FID arises from the discursive framing of the narrative: lexical choices, metaphorical structure, and contextual markers all contribute to the reader's inference. For instance, a passage of FID depicting domestic labor or bodily vulnerability may prompt a feminine reading, even in the absence of pronouns or overt gender signals. Gender attribution, in this case, is driven by semantic fields and narrative tone rather than syntactic cues.

FID also allows for layered and contradictory subjectivities: the narrator may simultaneously endorse, reflect, or ironize the character's thoughts. This polyphonic quality produces interpretive ambiguity, which activates the reader's gender schemas. When the narrator's stance is ambivalent or unstable, readers are more likely to fill the gaps using familiar cultural frameworks – assigning gender based on emotional resonance, moral framing, or relational positioning.

Moreover, FID complicates the notion of narrative ownership. Whose perspective is being represented? Who has epistemic authority? The technique deliberately undermines clear distinctions between narrative levels, making it difficult to localize intention or voice. In this way, FID creates a zone of ontological indeterminacy where gender attribution becomes a provisional act – subject to revision, hesitation, and contradiction.

To test the proposed account of speech and thought representation – particularly the effects of free-indirect discourse – Bortolussi and Dixon conducted an experiment manipulating both speech style and character role in Katherine Anne Porter's short story *Rope*. The original, composed almost entirely in free-indirect speech, depicts a marital argument following the husband's return from town. Eight experimental versions were created through a factorial combination of male and female speech styles (free-indirect vs. direct) and story roles (male vs. female returning from town).

Participants evaluated each version on two nine-point scales: the relative rationality of male and female characters and the perceived gender of the narrator. Free-indirect speech increased the attribution of rationality to the focalized character and, correspondingly, decreased it for the opposing party – consistent with the hypothesis that free-indirect style fosters narrator-character overlap. Story role also exerted a strong, content-driven influence: the returning character was generally judged more rational, irrespective of gender.

Speech style similarly affected perceptions of narrator gender: narrators were more often judged male when male characters spoke in free-indirect style, and female when female characters did so. An exception arose in the original version, where both voices were rendered in free-indirect style and the male returned from town, producing an unexpectedly strong attribution of femaleness to the narrator. Model comparisons confirmed robust effects for story role and speech style, with limited evidence for additional factors. Overall, the findings support the claim that free-indirect discourse systematically shapes narrator-character associations, influencing both perceived character traits and inferred narrator identity.

4. Empirical studies

Building on this theoretical foundation, the following empirical studies explore how readers infer gender from narrative structures and stylistic cues in women's fiction.

4.1 The Linguistic-Cultural Hypothesis: The Relationship Between Linguistic Markers, Cultural Traits, and the Perception of Authorial Gender (Study I)

Design and administration

To test Fludernik hypothesis (1999) we designed a reading experiment using three narrative excerpts, each drawn from a bestselling novel and manipulated according to the procedures detailed below. The selected novels were: *The Dinner* by Herman Koch (male author), *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins (female author), and *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson, a novel written by a woman in which the narrator's gender is purposefully left ambiguous.

The selected excerpts were chosen for their capacity to foreground gendered narrative styles: *The Dinner* highlights themes typically aligned with a masculine worldview, while *The Girl on the Train* emphasizes motifs more frequently associated with femininity. *Written on the Body*, by contrast, presents a deliberately androgynous voice, maintaining thematic and stylistic neutrality – although the embodied sensitivity of the narrative voice tends to be perceived as feminine. The excerpt from *The Dinner* centers on economic power within bourgeois settings. The passage from *The Girl on the Train* explores betrayal – widely regarded in popular discourse as a theme more resonant with female interest. This was compounded by motifs of curiosity (a stereotypically feminine trait) and alcohol consumption, which, in Western cultural framings, is often coded as more prevalent among women. The excerpt from *Written on the Body* focused on friendship, a topic less clearly gendered, and included references to food, also not strongly marked along gender lines.

Each excerpt was manipulated to varying degrees. The third passage required only minimal modifications, primarily involving control of gender-marked linguistic elements. In the other two, more extensive interventions were applied: in *The Dinner*, the original masculine linguistic markers were replaced with feminine ones, while the thematic focus on power, economic status, and physical competition – typically associated with masculinity – remained unchanged. Additionally, the original male character through whose consciousness the narrative was focalized was replaced by a female character, preserving the structure of internal cognitive access. In *The Girl on the Train*, the female reflector-character was recoded as male, while retaining all culturally feminine narrative traits and patterns of thought. The result was a male narrator engaged in culturally gendered “feminine” behavior and cognition.

All excerpts were standardized in terms of reading duration and readability, as assessed using the Gulpease Index. Particular attention was paid to preventing overt contradictions between linguistic markers and cultural traits, while nonetheless allowing perceptible dissonance to remain. The overarching goal was to produce a subtle yet detectable semantic ambiguity across the texts.

The study employed a within-subjects design with in-person administration under the supervision of a researcher. All participants were exposed to the three experimental conditions. The reading sequence was fixed: first *The Dinner*, then *The Girl on the Train*, followed by *Written on the Body*.

After each passage, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire. Using a five-point Likert scale, they indicated whether they believed the passage had been authored

by a man or a woman. This question was then repeated in binary format. Participants were also invited to leave optional comments explaining their reasoning.

A total of 42 undergraduate and graduate students in the humanities (primarily from Communication and International Relations programs) participated in the study. Most participants were native Italian speakers, with only 2% reporting a different European language background. The sample consisted of 61% men and 37% women, with 2% declining to specify gender. Ages ranged from 18 to 36, with 89% falling within the 18–25 age bracket.

Results and discussion

Approximately 70% of responses to the binary gender-identification question was influenced primarily by linguistic markers. This pattern held even when participants expressed uncertainty on the Likert scale – opting for neutral or intermediate positions – or when their final binary response contradicted their earlier Likert selection. Linguistic cues thus emerged as the dominant factor in gender attribution, confirming their primacy in the interpretive process.

A particularly salient finding concerns the divergence in interpretive strategies between male and female participants. Roughly 50% of male respondents attributed male authorship to the second passage (*The Girl on the Train*), despite the fact that it had been linguistically marked as male while retaining thematically feminine content. This tendency was most evident in a scene depicting a male narrator observing a woman committing adultery. In open-ended comments, several participants remarked that the narrator's emotional investment in the act of betrayal and his affective response to witnessing it were more indicative of a masculine sensibility. One plausible explanation for this interpretation lies in the narrative's structural configuration: although the betrayal is presented as a disruption of romantic stability, with the narrator portrayed as distressed by the collapse of an idealized relationship, the scene unfolds in two focalized stages. Initially, the female character is observed in a third-person descriptive mode; subsequently, focalization shifts to the internal reflections of the betrayed husband, offering cognitive access to his emotional distress.

This shift arguably re-centers the narrative around male suffering, rather than emphasizing female curiosity or romantic disillusionment – themes more typical of conventional romance narratives. Such interpretive framing appears to resonate more strongly with male respondents, suggesting that both structural elements and cultural predispositions jointly inform gender attribution.

A comparable pattern emerged among female respondents in relation to the first passage (*The Dinner*), which featured traditionally masculine themes – power and violence – conveyed through a narrator coded with feminine linguistic markers. Approximately 30% of female participants reported perceiving semantic dissonance in this instance, highlighting the subtle tension between gendered language and thematic content.

In contrast, the third passage (*Written on the Body*) was overwhelmingly attributed to a female author. Two principal factors contributed to this attribution. First, a stereotypically feminine reference to domestic chores – specifically, tidying the house – was salient. Second, many participants cited an immediate post-reading impression that the narrative voice, despite its linguistic neutrality, was distinctly feminine. Bodily perception and sensory sensitivity, particularly when associated with emotional intimacy and friendship, were instinctively categorized as belonging to the feminine domain. This pattern reinforces enduring stereotypes that associate rational cognition with masculinity and empathic resonance with femininity.

The most revealing outcome of the study concerns the differential ambiguity perceived in the first two passages. Many participants found the second passage (*The Girl on the*

Train) to be more ambiguous than the first. Ambiguity was measured by instances of neutral Likert responses or by contradictions between Likert responses and final binary attributions. These data support two major observations. First, narrative structure significantly influences the perceived gender of the narrator or focalizing character. In the first-person narrative of *The Dinner*, the narrator's identity was directly signaled through linguistic elements – such as gendered adjectives and endings – enabling readers to more easily align linguistic markers with the character's perceived gender. In contrast, the third-person narration in *The Girl on the Train* conveyed the character's masculinity primarily through proper nouns and internal focalization, without the support of overt grammatical gendering. Second, the results suggest a perceptual asymmetry. When masculine themes are attributed to a linguistically feminine narrator, the incongruity tends to be detected more readily. Conversely, when feminine themes are presented – regardless of narrator gender – they are automatically interpreted as feminine in nature. This asymmetry was especially evident in the responses to the third passage: despite the narrator's gender being deliberately ambiguous, participants uniformly classified the text as feminine, based solely on thematic content and stylistic tone.

4.2 The Structural Hypothesis: The Relationship Between Focalization, Cognitive-Perceptual Access, and the Perception of Authorial Gender in Female Narrative (Study 2)

Design and administration

Building on the experiment by Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) (§ 3.2), we designed a mixed-design (between-within) study to further explore how variations in focalization influence perceptions of the narrator's gender.

Two narrative excerpts from canonical female-authored works were selected: *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf (in the Italian translation by Nadia Fusini for *I Meridiani Mondadori*) and *Le parole tra noi leggere* by Lalla Romano. The first is written in third person, the second in first person. In both, we identified passages that foreground the contrast between maternal and paternal approaches to child-rearing – more broadly, scenes in which differences in parental attitudes are rendered particularly salient. From *To the Lighthouse*, we used the opening scene, which clearly juxtaposes the mother's emotional warmth with the father's detached rationality. From *Le parole tra noi leggere*, we selected a scene in which the two parents react differently to their child's school performance.

Each passage was adapted into two versions:

1. The first version involved minimal editing (mainly lexical trimming and transitions) and remained faithful to the original structure, emphasizing the maternal perspective.
2. The second version underwent substantial reconfiguration: narrative rearrangement and connective phrasing were introduced to foreground the paternal viewpoint. The structural transformation inverted the primary and secondary perspectives, such that the dominant focal lens shifted from the mother to the father.

In both versions, the dominant focalization – whether maternal or paternal – was clearly marked. However, rather than creating explicit viewpoint shifts, the subordinate perspective was embedded within the dominant one. This embedding strategy preserved a subtle competition between viewpoints while accentuating the asymmetry in access to information and emotional nuance. As a result, we obtained two semantically self-contained and narratively coherent versions for each source text: one in which the mother serves as the primary observer of the scene, and one in which the father does so.

To reinforce this contrast, distinct titles were assigned to each version, carefully chosen to reflect stereotypical gender associations: from *To the Lighthouse*, the maternal version was titled *L'isola dei sogni* (The Island of Dreams), while the paternal version was titled *La verità* (The Truth); from *Le parole tra noi leggere*, the maternal version was titled *I ricordi del cuore* (Memories of the Heart), while the paternal version was titled *L'esame* (The Examination).

These titles were intended to amplify the opposition between feminine-coded values (emotion, memory, affective engagement) and masculine-coded ones (rationality, objectivity, judgment). All excerpts were calibrated to allow for a two-minute reading time.

The experiment was administered online via Microsoft Forms 365 using a mixed-design methodology. Two distinct versions of the questionnaire were created:

1. Survey A began with the female-perspective version of *To the Lighthouse* followed by the male-perspective version of *Le parole tra noi leggere*.
2. Survey B reversed the order: it presented the male-perspective version of *To the Lighthouse* first, followed by the female-perspective version of the second text.

Each version was distributed with dedicated access links and QR codes, circulated randomly through mailing lists targeting university students, reading circles, and school-teachers. The surveys remained open for a fifteen-day window, with no in-person sessions conducted for this phase.

This dual-structure design allowed us to segment participants into two between-subjects groups (Survey A and Survey B), enabling us to assess the effects of presentation order. At the same time, since each participant was exposed to both narrative conditions – one with a feminine and one with a masculine focalization – the design also supported within-subjects comparison of gendered perspective effects. This hybrid structure helped balance participant exposure and minimized discrepancies between the two surveys.

After reading each passage, participants completed a series of twelve items based on a 3-point Likert scale (low, medium, high), adapted from the *Narrative Transportation Scale*. These items were organized into three categories:

- Engagement and Empathy: 6 items assessing identification with the narrator or reflector-character.
- Narrative Transportation: 4 items evaluating the reader's absorption in the story world.
- Message Evaluation: 2 items measuring how participants interpreted and appraised the message conveyed by the narrative.

The choice of a simplified 3-point scale was made to optimize usability on mobile devices, without compromising interpretive validity.

Participants then completed four 5-point Likert items derived from Grice's conversational maxims – maxims of relevance, clarity, quantity, and sincerity – which, in Bortolussi and Dixon's framework, constitute the cognitive criteria by which readers assess the narrator's cooperativeness and credibility. Higher scores on these items correspond to a stronger attribution of reliability and narrative responsibility to the conversational narrator.

Next, two additional items assessed the narrator's *rationality* and *emotional sensitivity*, each on a 5-point scale. These were followed by a ranked-choice question, in which participants ordered a set of narrator attributes from most to least relevant. This question served as a confirmatory probe into participants' implicit construction of narrator identity.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate the perceived gender of the narrator using two formats: first, a 10-point probability scale ranging from "definitely female" to "definitely male," and second, a forced binary choice (male/female).

The survey concluded with optional demographic questions (age, gender), a self-assessment of reading habits, and a revised version of the *Author Recognition Test* (ART), modeled after the German adaptation. The ART included 20 names – 10 male and 10 female authors – randomly distributed, with phonetic foils generated via AI-assisted modeling. The list included Italian and international literary writers, Nobel laureates and winners of the Italian *Premio Strega*.

Results and discussion

The study involved 51 participants: 30 in Test A and 21 in Test B. Test A respondents were overwhelmingly female (25), while Test B showed a more balanced distribution (13 women, 7 men, and one non-disclosure). Age ranges were evenly spread between 25 and 55 years in both groups. In Test A, a majority (53%) identified as frequent or expert readers, while a smaller fraction (20%) described themselves as “low-level readers.” Interestingly, even within the more experienced group, many participants displayed limited familiarity with female authors: Romano, Ortese, and Munro were often unknown, and Romano, in particular, was misclassified as “not a writer” by 60% of respondents. Such gaps in literary recognition are revealing, not merely of the limits of cultural capital, but also of the systematic invisibility of female authors in shared literary memory.

When the two initial excerpts (*L'isola dei sogni* vs. *La verità*) are compared, responses concerning empathy with characters, transportation, and message evaluation display no major differences. In both conditions, participants reported strong narrative transportation, deeper engagement with the mother–child than with the father–child relationship, and more consistent alignment with the mother’s stance. This uniformity is unsurprising, since the manipulation did not target empathy or transportation directly, but it nonetheless highlights the weight of thematic resonance and entrenched gender stereotypes in shaping reading experience. Message evaluation confirms the dominance of the maternal viewpoint regardless of narrative perspective, suggesting that the thematic frame exerts more influence than focalization. The finding departs from Bortolussi and Dixon’s results but can be accounted for by both the female-dominant sample (cf. de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, Beentjes 2012) and by the rheme-oriented formulation of the question, which emphasized endorsement of a character’s position rather than evaluation of its thematic content.

Perceptions of narrator cooperation, measured through Gricean maxims, remained consistently high across both groups, suggesting that cooperative narration is a relatively stable interpretive expectation that perspective shifts do not easily unsettle. More revealing, however, were judgments about the narrator’s rationality and sensitivity. In *L'isola dei sogni*, focalized through a female perspective, the narrator was perceived as significantly more sensitive (4.13 vs. 3.86), while rationality remained stable across conditions. The adjectives assigned to the narrator reinforced this distinction: the female-perspective narrator was “sensitive, reflective, empathetic,” while the male-perspective narrator was “reflective, sensitive, strong.” Narrative perspective, then, subtly but decisively activated gendered schemata: sensitivity and empathy for the female perspective, strength and rationality for the male.

The same schema appeared in responses about the author. Participants tended to exclude male authorship when reading from a female perspective and vice versa, with the effect more pronounced in the manipulated version (Test B). Yet when asked to make a categorical choice, participants in Test A predominantly selected MALE (57%), a result difficult to reconcile with the sample’s gender composition and with their previous answers. This inconsistency suggests that, when pressed to decide, participants default to entrenched cultural stereotypes of authorship, privileging the masculine even against their own interpretive evidence. Open-ended comments reinforce this interpretation: only two participants

explicitly justified their attribution of male authorship, and both relied on minimal cues (the male gender of the child character, the absence of other contextual markers). Notably, participants in Test A also responded more quickly (13.46 minutes vs. 14.37 minutes), which may indicate a greater reliance on heuristic shortcuts under time pressure.

Responses to the Romano excerpts (Test A = manipulated male perspective; Test B = original female perspective) reveal similar tendencies. Narrative transportation was somewhat weaker in Test B, though message alignment and identification with the female character increased slightly – an effect plausibly linked to perspective. Narrator cooperation remained high in both cases, while judgments of rationality and sensitivity were indistinguishable, producing the same descriptors (“reflective, acute, strong”). Incremental scales showed no significant variation in gender attribution, but categorical responses again aligned with the manipulated male perspective. Some participants justified their choices by appealing to the first-person narration, which, by intensifying the transparency effect, facilitated the transfer of the reflector’s traits to narrator and then to author.

Viewed comparatively, the manipulated excerpts made the relationship between focalization and perceived narrator gender much more direct. This points to a deeper issue: manipulated texts do not behave like literary texts. Whereas literary works pursue aesthetic and reflective ends, manipulated or constructed excerpts lend themselves more easily to cognitive tasks of information acquisition, with corresponding effects on reader response. From this perspective, the findings suggest not only that literary texts resist reduction to cognitive-emotional decoding models, but also that they require distinct frameworks for understanding their reception. Such a distinction has implications for literary pedagogy as well, since teaching literature involves not merely training comprehension but fostering awareness of aesthetic and interpretive complexity (Kidd, Castano 2013).

Finally, the within-test data confirm a structural bias already highlighted by Fludernik (1999): the authority of male authorship remains the cultural default. Even with a predominantly female sample, masculine attribution was more certain, and in cases of doubt participants gravitated toward the male option. Such results suggest that gender stereotypes continue to govern the horizon of expectations in reading practices, shaping even the most basic interpretive gestures of attribution.

5. Conclusions

The relationship between narrative genre and gender in women’s fiction can be identified in terms of recurring themes and writing styles. These may contribute to outlining the coordinates useful for defining the genre of women’s fiction (§ 1). Such coordinates, drawn from critical textual analysis, nevertheless require an in-depth examination of the cognitive processes activated during reading. For this reason, the approach of psychonarratology – understood as a discipline that integrates psychological analysis of the reader with textual analysis – can prove highly useful. This discipline employs empirical research as a method for studying reading processes. The empirical method, therefore, is instrumental in achieving critical-literary knowledge objectives that presuppose an understanding of the decoding processes activated during reading – processes that are themselves determined by specific textual configurations, not only stylistic or thematic, but also narratological (§ 2).

Several scholars have explored this aspect. In her experimental study, Fludernik (1999) demonstrates that, in the absence of clear linguistic markers that help define the narrator’s gender, or of information about the author, the reader, in recognizing the female authorship of a narrative text, relies on the examination of cultural features – often stereotypes – that associate themes and behaviours with the female sphere (§ 3.1). Marisa Bortolussi and

Peter Dixon, by contrast, in various experimental studies, show that the recognition of the author's gender – and thus the recognition of the genre “women's fiction” – depends on structural figures of narration. These figures include: the conversational narrator, the use of focalization, and the management of indirect and direct speech (§ 3.2 and § 3.3).

To provide a further contribution, we presented two empirical investigations into reading processes and into the recognition of the author's gender and the conversational narrator in women's narrative texts (§ 4). The first study set in competition, within the same text, linguistic markers of the narrator and cultural traits associated with sexual gender, with the aim of assessing which of the two textual figures would perform better in terms of gender attribution to the author. From the overall reading of the results, Fludernik's secondary hypothesis (1999) (her primary hypothesis – empirically disproved – was that the reader's sexual gender influenced the attribution of the author's sexual gender through projection), namely the hypothesis that, in the absence of linguistic markers or detailed information about the author, the reader is influenced by cultural stereotypes, finds confirmation in the responses to the third passage (from *Written on the Body*). In this case, a thematically neutral or cross-gender subject, such as friendship or food, when associated with cultural traits linked to the feminine – sensitive perception and the stereotype of domestic chores – was attributed to a female author in the absence of clear linguistic markers.

The responses to the other passages, however, first highlight the guiding role of the narrator's linguistic markers in determining the author's gender, even when these contradict the narrator's cultural traits and create uncertainty. This is a double result: (i) on the one hand, it underscores the association between narrator and empirical author: the narrator's characteristics are transferred by the reader onto the empirical author; (ii) on the other hand, it reveals a hierarchy between textual markers and cultural traits in narrative reading: textual markers assume a guiding role that is privileged by the reader even when in contradiction with cultural markers, that is, with the themes addressed. It should be noted, however, that multiple instances of uncertainty in the final choice were recorded, and that, under different experimental conditions, the reader might attribute to the narrator in those passages the status of narrative unreliability. Furthermore, for a significant percentage of responses, the need emerged to evaluate the structural characteristics of the text that act unconsciously upon the reader, shaping their decoding processes (cf. topic of betrayal).

The second study offered a more in-depth exploration of the impact that narrative structures may have on attributing gender to the conversational narrator. It revisited, with significant variations, the study proposed by Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon (§ 3.2), adapting it to the context of women's literature.

The findings suggested that variations in the construction of narrative information through internal focalization amplify the transparency effect, prompting readers to project the attributes of the reflector character – including gender – onto both the conversational narrator and the implied author of the passage. This mechanism is not neutral: it becomes more salient under specific conditions, namely (i) when the attributes align with conventional masculine stereotypes; (ii) when the passage is rendered in the first person, thereby reinforcing the illusion of immediacy and voice; and (iii) when the narrative structure conforms to patterns associated with popular or entertainment fiction, or with texts consumed for non-aesthetic purposes such as information retrieval or leisure. These conditions reveal how narrative perspective interacts with cultural schemata, exposing the persistence of gendered interpretive frames even in ostensibly neutral reading practices.

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