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## Unraveling Gender Discrepancy and a Feminist Call for Social Change: A Transitivity Analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Selected Poems

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the representation of women and gender discrepancy in selected poems of Charlotte Perkins Gilman through the lens of Transitivity, a key component of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by M.A.K. Halliday. The research adopts a qualitative approach and analyzes six poems: The Housewife, One Girl of Many, To the Indifferent Women, An Obstacle, Wedded Bliss, and To Mothers. By examining process types, participant roles, and circumstantial elements, the study uncovers how linguistic choices construct social meanings and reinforce or challenge patriarchal ideologies. The findings reveal a dominant use of material, relational, and mental processes to depict women lived experiences, subordination, and evolving awareness. The study concludes that Gilman's poetic discourse not only exposes gender inequality but also functions as a powerful call for social reform.*

**Keywords:** Gender Discrepancy, Feminism, Transitivity, SFL, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

### Introduction

The present study is an attempt to explore the representation of women in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's selected poems in order to uncover the concept of gender discrepancy through the application of the Transitivity framework, which is a fundamental component of Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL views language not simply as a system of grammatical rules, but as a resource for making meaning and for performing social functions. According to this theory, language is inherently a meaning-making system in which meanings are created, exchanged, and interpreted within specific social contexts (Halliday & Webster, 2004). Rather than focusing only on form, SFL emphasizes the relationship between language, context, and ideology.

Within SFL, language is organized around three meta functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Each meta function serves a different purpose in meaning construction. The ideational meta function is concerned with how language represents experience and reality, the interpersonal meta function deals with social relationships and attitudes, while the textual meta function organizes language into coherent and meaningful discourse. Transitivity, which forms a core part of the ideational meta function, is particularly significant as it explains how human experiences are encoded in language through different types of processes such as material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential processes (Halliday, 1994). Through these processes, language constructs a particular version of reality, assigning roles to participants and shaping how actions and experiences are understood.

The transitivity model has increasingly been recognized as a powerful analytical tool for the linguistic study of literary texts. Its application in poetry, however, is still an emerging area of research. Poetry is a highly condensed and stylistically rich form of language, often characterized by ambiguity, symbolism, and multiple layers of meaning. Because of this complexity, poetic texts require systematic linguistic approaches to uncover the underlying ideological and thematic structures. The Transitivity framework provides a useful lens for examining how poets encode experiences, emotions, and social realities through specific linguistic choices, thereby revealing deeper meanings that may not be immediately visible through traditional literary analysis.

In this study, six poems by Charlotte Perkins Gilman namely *One Girl of Many*, *An Obstacle*, *The Housewife*, *Wedded Bliss*, *To the Indifferent Women*, and *To Mothers* have been selected for detailed transitivity analysis. These poems have been chosen due to their strong thematic focus on women lived experiences, gender roles, and the social constraints imposed by patriarchal structures. Charlotte Perkins Gilman is widely recognized as a prominent feminist writer, social reformer, and intellectual figure who contributed significantly to discussions on gender equality and women's rights. Her literary works span across various genres, including poetry, short fiction, essays, and theoretical writings, all of which reflect her deep concern with social justice and gender oppression.

During the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, Gilman produced a substantial body of literary work in which she critically examined the position of women in society. She dedicated much of her writing to exposing the systemic injustices faced by women, particularly within domestic and marital institutions. Her poetry, in particular, serves as a powerful medium for expressing the emotional, psychological, and social struggles experienced by women under patriarchal domination. Gilman's poetic corpus, consisting of more than five hundred poems, reflects her consistent engagement with themes of femininity, autonomy, and resistance. Despite the richness of her work, her poetry has not yet been extensively analyzed through the lens of transitivity, which presents a significant research gap.

In light of this gap, the present study employs the Transitivity framework to examine how linguistic choices in Gilman's selected poems construct the social status of women and represent gendered experiences. By analyzing the distribution of process types and participant roles, the study aims to uncover how women are positioned within the poetic discourse whether as active agents, passive recipients, or experiencers of social conditions. This approach not only highlights the linguistic strategies used to represent gender disparity but also reveals the ideological underpinnings of Gilman's feminist vision.

Ultimately, this research seeks to integrate linguistic theory with feminist literary criticism, demonstrating how Systemic Functional Linguistics can contribute to a deeper understanding of literature as a site of ideological construction. It further aims to show that language in poetry is not merely aesthetic but also deeply social and political, encoding meanings that reflect and challenge dominant power structures.

## **Literature Review**

### **Stylistics**

Stylistics is an interdisciplinary field that applies linguistic tools to the analysis of literary texts in order to uncover deeper meanings embedded in language. It focuses on how writers manipulate linguistic structures to achieve particular aesthetic and ideological effects. According to Simpson (2004), stylistics provides a systematic framework to analyze textual patterns and interpret literary creativity. Similarly, Verdonk (2002, as cited in Jaafar, 2014) defines stylistics as the study of distinctive linguistic expression, emphasizing how meaning is shaped through language choices. Leech and Short (1981, as cited in Darani, 2014) argue that style reflects the author's

deliberate selection of linguistic features to achieve specific communicative goals. Thus, stylistics plays a crucial role in revealing how literary texts construct meaning beyond surface-level interpretation.

### **Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)**

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Halliday, views language as a social semiotic system through which meanings are constructed and exchanged (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Unlike structural approaches that focus on form, SFL emphasizes function and context, considering language as a resource for meaning-making.

Halliday (1994) proposes three meta functions of language:

Ideational meta function (representation of experience)

Interpersonal meta function (social relationships)

Textual meta function (organization of discourse)

Egins (2004) highlights that these meta functions operate simultaneously in all linguistic expressions, making SFL a powerful tool for discourse analysis. The ideational meta function, which is central to this study, is realized through the Transitivity system, enabling the analysis of how experiences are encoded in language.

### **Transitivity Framework**

Transitivity is a core component of the ideational meta function and is concerned with how experiences are represented through processes, participants, and circumstances (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It goes beyond traditional grammar by focusing on meaning rather than structure. According to Simpson (1993), Transitivity provides insights into how speakers construct reality through language. It categorizes processes into six types: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential. These processes reveal patterns of action, cognition, and identity, making Transitivity particularly useful for uncovering ideological meanings in texts (Hassanpour & Hashim, 2012).

### **Previous Studies on Transitivity Analysis**

Numerous studies have applied Transitivity analysis to literary texts to uncover hidden ideologies. Halliday's (1971) analysis of *The Inheritors* demonstrated how linguistic choices reflect power relations between social groups. Similarly, Burton (1982) used Transitivity to analyze Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, revealing the protagonist's lack of agency within patriarchal structures. In poetic discourse, Hassanpour and Hashim (2012) analyzed Sylvia Plath's poem *Daddy* and found that male figures were predominantly associated with material processes, indicating power and dominance, while female figures were linked with mental processes, reflecting passivity. Damanik (2017) and Waluyo (2016) further confirm that Transitivity analysis is effective in revealing thematic and ideological patterns in poetry. However, these studies largely overlook gender discrepancy in Gilman's poetry, which this research addresses.

### **About the Poet: Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is widely recognized as a pioneering feminist writer whose works critique patriarchal structures and advocate women's empowerment. Her writings, including *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Women and Economics*, focus on the socio-economic and psychological oppression of women (Kessler, 1995).

Gilman argued that women's economic dependence on men is the root cause of gender inequality (Gilman, 1898). Her literary works consistently challenge traditional gender roles and emphasize the need for women's independence and social participation. According to Gagnon (n.d.), Gilman's poetry reflects her feminist ideology by portraying women's struggles and their potential for transformation.

Scholars such as Dreler (2016) highlight that Gilman's work is deeply rooted in social reform, aiming to dismantle oppressive structures and redefine women's roles in society. Her poems, though less explored than her prose, offer significant insights into her feminist vision.

Despite her contributions, limited research has applied linguistic frameworks like Transitivity to analyze her poetry. This study, therefore, fills an important gap by combining feminist criticism with linguistic analysis.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design to explore gender discrepancy in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's selected poems through the Transitivity framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, linguistic patterns, and ideological implications embedded in the text rather than measuring numerical data.

The data consist of six purposively selected poems by Charlotte Perkins Gilman: *The Housewife*, *One Girl of Many*, *To the Indifferent Women*, *An Obstacle*, *Wedded Bliss*, and *To Mothers*. These poems were chosen because they clearly represent women's experiences, gender roles, and social constraints within a patriarchal framework.

The study is based on Halliday's (1994) Transitivity system, which is part of the ideational meta function in Systemic Functional Linguistics. Transitivity analysis examines how experiences are represented through processes, participants, and circumstances. The analysis focuses on six process types: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential.

The analysis was carried out in a systematic way. First, each poem was closely read to understand its overall meaning and thematic concerns. Then, the poems were divided into clauses, as Transitivity analysis operates at the clause level. After that, each clause was analyzed to identify process types and participant roles. Finally, the findings were interpreted to explain how linguistic choices construct meanings related to gender inequality and feminist ideology.

The reliability of the study is ensured through consistent application of the Transitivity framework across all selected poems, while validity is maintained by grounding the analysis in established linguistic theory and interpreting results within a feminist critical perspective.

### **Discussion**

The analysis reveals that Transitivity patterns in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's selected poems play a crucial role in constructing gendered meanings and exposing patriarchal ideologies. The distribution of process types, along with participant roles, demonstrates how women are linguistically positioned within structures of power and limitation.

Material processes dominate across the poems; however, their function is ideologically significant rather than merely descriptive. In *The Housewife*, for instance, clauses frequently depict the woman performing repetitive domestic actions, yet she is often constructed within a restricted sphere. A typical pattern can be illustrated as: "She tends the house" (Actor + Material Process + Goal). While the presence of the Actor role might suggest agency, the limited range of actions confines her identity to domestic labor. In other instances, the woman is implied rather than explicitly empowered, reinforcing her invisibility beyond household duties. Thus, material processes here reflect not empowerment but controlled activity within patriarchal boundaries.

A similar pattern is evident in *One Girl of Many*, where the female figure is frequently positioned as a Goal rather than an Actor, indicating passivity. For example, a clause can be interpreted as: "She is burdened by life" (Goal + Material Process in passive form). This structure highlights that actions are imposed upon her rather than initiated by her. Such linguistic representation reinforces the idea of women as victims of social conditions, lacking control over their circumstances.

In contrast, *To the Indifferent Women* introduces a shift in Transitivity patterns by incorporating more mental processes. For example: “You do not see the suffering world” (Senser + Mental Process + Phenomenon). Here, women are constructed as conscious beings capable of perception, yet their failure lies in their inaction. The use of mental processes emphasizes awareness and responsibility, suggesting that women possess the cognitive ability to recognize societal issues but remain disengaged. This creates a critical tone, urging women to move from passive awareness to active participation.

The poem *An Obstacle* presents a more dynamic interplay of material processes, highlighting struggle and resistance. A representative clause may be framed as: “She climbs the difficult path” (Actor + Material Process + Circumstance). In this case, the woman is clearly positioned as an Actor, indicating agency and determination. However, the repeated presence of obstacles—often symbolically linked to male dominance—limits her progress. This duality reflects the tension between women’s aspirations and societal barriers.

In *Wedded Bliss*, relational processes play a dominant role in constructing gender identities. For instance, relationships between male and female figures can be expressed as: “The lion is strong, the sheep is weak” (Carrier + Relational Process + Attribute). Such clauses assign contrasting attributes to male and female figures, reinforcing traditional stereotypes of strength and weakness. Through these relational structures, the poem critiques the unequal power dynamics embedded within marriage.

Finally, *To Mothers* integrates both relational and material processes to redefine women’s roles. A clause such as “Mothers shape the world” (Actor + Material Process + Goal) positions women as powerful agents capable of influencing society. Unlike earlier poems, where women are confined or passive, this representation emphasizes their potential as contributors to social development. Additionally, relational clauses attribute significance to motherhood, elevating it from a domestic role to a universal responsibility.

Across all poems, the limited use of verbal processes is also significant. Women are rarely represented as “Sayers,” indicating their marginalization in discourse. This absence reflects the broader silencing of women in patriarchal societies, where their voices are often suppressed or ignored.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that Gilman’s use of Transitivity is deeply ideological. Material processes often depict constrained or imposed actions, mental processes reveal internal awareness, and relational processes construct socially imposed identities. However, a gradual shift is evident, where women move from passive roles to more active and empowered positions. Through these linguistic patterns, Gilman not only exposes gender inequality but also articulates a powerful call for social change, encouraging women to transcend limitations and redefine their roles in society.

### **Overall Findings**

The combined analysis of process types and participant roles reveals a consistent pattern: women are linguistically positioned in ways that limit their agency while simultaneously highlighting their internal awareness. While they appear as Actors in some contexts, their actions are often restricted. Their frequent role as Goals and Carriers further reinforces their passive and socially constructed identities.

These findings demonstrate that Gilman’s poetry uses language strategically to expose gender inequality. The Transitivity patterns not only reflect women lived experiences but also critique the societal structures that shape those experiences.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that transitivity analysis is a highly effective linguistic tool for uncovering and interpreting gender ideologies embedded within literary texts. By examining Charlotte Perkins Gilman's selected poems through the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the research reveals how grammatical choices are not neutral but instead reflect and construct social meanings related to gender roles and power relations. Gilman's poetic discourse consistently exposes the entrenched structures of patriarchy and highlights the unequal positioning of women in both private and public spheres.

The findings indicate a clear dominance of material and relational processes in the selected poems. This linguistic pattern suggests that women are frequently represented in terms of actions performed upon them or identities imposed on them, rather than as autonomous agents of change. Such representation reinforces their limited agency within a patriarchal social order, where their roles are often defined by dependency, domesticity, and societal expectations. In contrast, the presence of mental processes, though comparatively fewer, is significant as it reflects women's consciousness, emotional depth, and psychological resistance to oppressive structures. Furthermore, the analysis of verbal processes reveals moments of expression and assertion, where women attempt to voice their experiences and challenge dominant narratives. These instances, although less frequent, are crucial in understanding the subtle forms of resistance embedded in Gilman's poetry. They indicate an emerging awareness and critique of gender-based constraints, suggesting that language becomes a site of both oppression and empowerment.

Overall, Gilman's poetic vision extends beyond mere representation of female suffering; it actively interrogates the ideological foundations of gender inequality. Her work calls for a re-evaluation of women's social positions and advocates for intellectual, emotional, and social liberation. By employing transitivity analysis, this study not only uncovers the linguistic mechanisms that construct gendered meanings but also underscores literature's role in challenging dominant ideologies and promoting feminist social reform.

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