**Gender in literary language. Readig *What I loved* by Siri Hustvedt**.

In 2003, the American Norwegian author Siri Hustvedt published her third novel *What I Loved,* which is now considered one of her most notable work. What separates this novel from some of her previous ones, is that the narrator of the novel is a man. Leo Hertzberg is a seventy years old art critic, and the novel takes us through his marriage, his work as an academic, and particularly his friendship with the artist Bill Wechsler. The many themes of the book are art, history, gender, psychology (more specifically hysteria, grief and eating disorders), and literature. It is an intellectual novel, with a plot carried out in a span of several decades and events, through the voice of Herzberg.

What caught my initial interest while reading this book, is the way in which Hustvedt, the female author, creates a male voice, and a male gaze, and hence describes the experiences that may seem authentically *male*. Yet, the female author here is not my entire focus, but rather the novel itself and its seemingly male language. I rely mostly on my own reading of *What I Loved*, and draw my attention onto the examples of such language. Although, it is worth mentioning what Hustvedt herself has written about the experiences of wiring with a male voice, like in the essay “Being a man” (2006). In it, Hustvedt reflects on the task of creating a male first-person narrator:

”I spent six years writing a book in which the narrator is a seventy-year old man named Leo Hertzberg. When I began the novel, I felt some anxiety about embodying a man and speaking a male voice. After a short time, that nervousness fell away, but it became clear to me that I was doing something different, that this speaker lived inside himself in a different way from me, and yet to *be* him, I was drawing on a masculine part of myself”. (s.101)

It`s worth mentioning that Hustvedts following novel, *The Sorrows of an American* (2008) is also written from the perspective of its male narrator. The theme of *gender swapping*, women pretending to be male, or the idea of the male gaze, is overall prominent in Hustvedts writing; in most of her novels, and explored further in her many essays. It is an impressive body of work, but it can be argued that *What I Loved* laid the groundwork for what we associate with her writing, and this exploration of the limits of gender.

One of the early conversations between the two male characters in *What I loved*, Leo and Bill, is a good example of how Hustvedt cosplays the masculine traits of her narrator. The conversation takes place after Leo buys a piece of Wechsler’s art, a self-portrait. What is remarkable with that self-portrait, is that it portraits a woman, while Bill Wechsler himself is a cis-man. After discussing the meaning behind his artistic choice, the two men talk about the model for the portrait, who later becomes Wechsler’s wife and plays an important role on Herzberg’s life, and in the novel in general:

 ““- Who is she?” I said.

“Violet Blom. She’s a graduate student at NYU. She gave me that drawing I showed you –– the one that looks like machinery.”

“What’s she studying?”

“History. She’s writing about hysteria in France at the turn of the century.” Bill lit another cigarette and glanced at the ceiling. “She’s a very smart girl –– unusual.” He blew the smoke up, and I watched its faint circles combine with specks of dust in the window light.” (s.15)

The clearly condescending way to describe a woman – “she’s a very smart girl – unusual”, may seem outdated, like they are not expecting a beautiful woman, worthy of channeling a man’s (Wechsler) self-portrait, to also be a smart girl. The comment appears to be sexist and objectifying, but it also gives me, the reader, an assurance that the narrator is, in fact, a man. Though sexist statements about women is not solely reserved for men, but it can be put into a historical context of how men would talk about a woman in an objectifying way, especially considering that this conversation in the novel takes place in 1975. One might think that the author Siri Hustvedt wouldn`t deliberately write a sexist statement, but she does when it is concerning the authenticity of a male conversation and the male narrator, and therefore it feels authentic. The question is: if we didn`t know the gender of the author in this case, would we believe it to be written by a man?

In *Gender and Literature* Alison Smith refers to an experiment where a group of readers, presented with samples of various literary works, tried to assume the gender of the writers, without knowing the writers’ names and genders beforehand. The study showed that it was nearly impossible to correctly guess a gender of the writer, just from a piece of writing. When we read, we never see the authors gender, only words and voices they have summoned for us on paper. That is, unless we read a name on the book cover. There are accounts of women taking on a male pseudonym, or other “male disguise”, to write and publish literature. Taking on (or performing) a masculine role has allowed these women to carry forth their creativity in a more protected way, and came with possibilities long denied for women. Luckily, a mere historical fact now, as in most societies today it is absurd to imagine a female writer resorting to hiding her gender, just to be a writer. Doing so would be considered an experiment, rather than a necessity.

My motivation for choosing this topic and this issue, partly is due to my first encounter with literary studies at University of Bergen, where at the master’s level there was only one woman on the first semesters curriculum. I wondered whether professors have neglected reading and teaching women because of ideological reasons, or if the lack of interest in reading and teaching women reflected societal norms. Questions arose whether women writers of different literary periods were considered “good enough” to be featured in academic curriculum, or if there were even enough works produced by women in those different periods to be featured.

Facing a complex field of such conditioned possibilities I see it as a welcomed addition to my project to explore the issue of how literary theory and gender theory can be interwoven, and where they serve as a supplement to each other. Mostly, I want to explore the possibilities of applying *ordinary language philosophy* as an option to analyzing a work of fiction, perhaps in the same way psychoanalysis has been used before in literary theory. Psychoanalysis is not, however, a theory I want to apply to my project, and my analysis. Since my bachelor degree is in gender studies, it comes natural for me to incorporate gender theory in everything I read and write, which is also true for this project.

As I move towards conclusion, I want to hopefully answer some of the many questions I ask along the way, such as: why would a female writer as Siri Hustvedt use a male voice in her novel, and is this male voice authentic –among inevitably several other questions.

The answers might bring forth a better understanding of how we can read women in an academic setting, or even better: read more women, getting rid of the bias of gendered reading all together.

**In her own words**

Speculating on Hustvedts motifs for writing this, and several other novels in a male voice, why would she have a use for that? *What I Loved* is the first of her novels written entirely in a male voice.

The experiment of *disguise* as a male is something she continues in other forms, in other novels: the before mentioned *Sorrows of an American*, and continued in *The Blazing World* (2014). Earlier in her work, she introduced a theme of pretending to be a man, in form of crossdressing, in her novel *The Blindfold* (1992). The gender swap is something that is apparently important to Hustvedt – a major influence to explore in her writing, hence my short introduction to her body of work – as if exploring the borders of what is female and what is male has been an ongoing project of hers, going on to, or maybe even culminating in *The Blazing World.* Interestedly, her novel from 2014 is written in a different form, within a narrative frame of several persons’ letters and recounts, both from men and women. It is important to mention the main theme of a woman artist using three different men to exhibit her works, to expose the sexism of the art world holding her back from recognition of her own, female name.

Coming back to the question of whether a reader could have guessed a writer’s gender just by reading the text, Hustvedt refers to selection of similar studies as Alison Smith, in her essay “No Competition” (2015). Amongst others, a 1968 study by Philip Goldberg– a test to determine whether female students are prone to evaluate essays written under a male name more highly than the same essay under a female name, with a result of the male name coming up with higher scores – a test which has been repeated with different results many times since. Hustvedt nevertheless call it “the masculine enhancement effect”[[1]](#footnote-1), a term I gladly incorporate into my own thinking, because of an overall self-explanatory meaning of it.

Further, as Hustvedt writes more examples, both in academic and literary fields, of how both women and men are complicit when it comes to masculine enhancement effect, and she argues: “statistics don’t explain *why* it happens […], and the way ideas of the feminine and the masculine infect our literary habits cannot be siphoned off from the larger culture, nor is it easy to discuss that culture as if it were an unvariegated block of consensus”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The real background for the essay lies not in these studies, however, but in her interview with the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard. Occasion for the interview was a release of the English translation of the first volume of *My Struggle,* Knausgaard’s critically acclaimed six volumes long autobiographical series. “No Competition” is not a critical essay about Kanusgaards writing as such, or a summary of their talk, although Hustvedt did publish the essay first aúnder the title “Knausgaard writes like a woman”; the overall theme if the essay is a further elaboration on both *My Struggle* and on some of the answers Knausgaard provided during the interview. Specifically, she wants to explore what her interview subject meant, when he answered the question on the absence of reference to female writers, while there being hundreds of references to male writers in his book, by stating simply “no competition”. With that, he eliminated the influence of writing by women (except Julia Kristeva), on his own writing, even though he continuously discussed the act of writing and reading as *feminine*.

For Knausgaard, in his own words as Hustvedt quotes them, it is perhaps not the act of writing itself that’s is feminine, but the feelings associated with novels, and fiction as a literary medium. It is the medium strongly connected to women, for the historical and cultural reasons I have already stated and will come back to several times throughout the course of this thesis; as Hustvedt herself puts it “the notion that reading and writing are *tainted* by the feminine has lodged itself deeply in the collective Western psyche”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In *My struggle*, Knausgaard writes freely about his experiences as a father and a husband, expressing a desire to find the balance between being a family man and a writer at the same time. He longs for time and space to write ­– not unlike the idea of a room of own’s one expressed by Virginia Woolf in the famous essay of the same name. If Knausgaard equates writing to femininity, does he do the same to the task of caring for his family? Hustvedt points out that maybe, Knausgaard, like several other male novelists and writers, do indeed juxtapose the two activities – writing and childcare – with being feminine, something that may seem confusing and alienating. “In other words, becoming woman or allowing woman to creep out into one’s writing self may be dangerously transformative”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In her own novel, *What I loved*, themes of childcare and family life are present, and important: both Leo Herzberg, her borrowed male voice, and the artist Bill Wechsler, have families and children, both sons, at the same time. Introduction of children is done at almost the very beginning of the novel, in the first half, Leo describes the experience of witnessing the birth of his son Mathew, or Matt. It continues with following remark of how he perceived his son to be in his first months of life:

“He was not a loud person, but I suppose that if every time you utter a barely audible noise, one of your parents comes running, you do not become loud. For a baby, he seemed weirdly compassionate. […] Our son also liked to feed us – half-chewed bits of banana or pureed spinach or mashed carrots. He would come at me with his sticky fist and push the unsavory contents into my mouth. We took it as a sign of his generosity. From the time he could sit, Matt showed great powers of concentration, and when I saw other children his age, I found I hadn’t exaggerated this trait.” (p. 38)

This curious and detailed observation of a proud new father about his only child, isn’t something that would be inherently read as feminine writing. All new parents, regardless of their gender, are prone to thinking of their children to be more advanced, more special than other children. Attentiveness to your baby’s growing personality and needs, is what constitutes childcare, and shouldn’t be exclusively assigned as a feminine trait, or in this case writing. Is that an example of what Knausgaard meant by feminine writing, the writing on tasks long considered to be women’s roles?

Although I do not disregard the historical struggles of women writers, and I did include historical examples how women had to overcome obstacles, and how they influenced the genre of the novel –it is not my focus here. My curiosity lies with the question of *how* we read, and if how we read may influence our reading preferences. Can reading novels, and following Knausgaards statements also writing novels, be regarded as feminine?

The question itself is of course, too big for me, and I must take out one component of the question, and it is the literary language. In the essay, Hustvedt notes that “both numbers and letters are abstract signs, *genderless representations*”, and it is close to my project of applying *ordinary language philosophy* onto my reading of her novel.

My main focus of this project, is to study the different aspects of literary language, that operate on the borderline of male/female, and I believe her novel to be a good source for understanding that operation.

**Ordinary language**

Toril Moi in *Revolution of the Ordinary* (2017) explores the theory of *ordinary language philosophy*, after Ludvig Wittgenstein, and in lesser extent Stanley Cavells interpretation of J. L. Austin. Wittgenstein writes in *Philosophical Investigations*  “What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (quote). Moi tries to renovate old methods of literary criticism through applying her own *investigations*. She signifies the notion of *reading* as an important act. The idea of a text as an object with a surface and consequently, a depth is well-determined in various theories of criticism, and Moi proposes an alternative in applying ordinary language philosophy to our practices of reading a text. To read with recognition (quote?), to look at a text in front of as a network of actions and expressions.

“Meaning is use”, said Wittgenstein, and argued that if we use a language, and the words making up said in a linguistic community, we all have a common understanding of what words mean, and their definition. The meaning of a word is to use it in a language, and *use* is simply what we do: we don’t have to use the words the way we use it now, we can create new words or use existing words in new ways – as long as members of our linguistic community go along with that, and if we are willing to speak to each other, then this *use* creates a “thin net over the abyss”, a communication. Language is a constantly changing *practice*, and there is no meaning behind the use, only meaning *in* use.

Applying the logic of use of language – does Hustvedt use a male language, because it resembles words in a language by male authors? Do I, as a reader, recognize similarities with how male authors use language: as in the example I used in the introduction, when the two men discussed a young woman, using sexist expressions about her – “she is smart for a girl, unusual”. As Moi would point out, it needs further investigation:

“[…] there is no need to assume that the concept “woman” or “women” must have a common essence. Rather, we can think of the word as a network of criss-crossing similarities, constantly established and extended in concrete use. This is not all the same thing as to suggest that “woman” now *means* “criss-crossing network of similarities”. […] Anyone who wants to get clear on what “woman” means must investigate specific cases. If we turn our backs on the individual case, we shackle the inquiry, for it will lead to no result”. (p. 100)

Because of the way we use it, this criss-crossing network of similarities, or the word *woman*, we get to investigate the meaning of the word in use. The same idea can easily be applied to the word *man*, or male, as the same thought of cirss-crossing similarities. Since, in this case, there is a literary text, the novel itself, we can apply the idea of *textuality*: I argue that because I am familiar with the literary text of a male author, I can recognize the way Hustvedt use the same textual means in her writing. (?)

Toril Moi does not incorporate many literary examples in her book, focusing mainly on philosophical body of work, which may seem at odds with her project of using ordinary language philosophy to interpret literature. Critique of this deficit is not my intention, but it does serve as an inspiration to apply “the spirit of the ordinary” to my reading of *What I Loved*. One of the questions I introduced as the main one in this project, is: can this be done?

**Intersectionality as theory of identity**

Feminist literary theory has long been considered a stand-alone theory within literary criticism. Moreover, feminist theory has been viewed as a *phenomenon* ­–– separate from the general practices of literary studies, with female scholars in the field seen as a minority preoccupied with minority matters, thus segregating gender issues and the literary canon.

Literary studies then become male-oriented – a generalization reinforced with the lack of women on curriculums and in the faculty – whereas gender studies are dominated by women teaching about mostly other women, and women’s issues.

Intersectionality is an understanding of different systems of oppression impacting our lives, both as individuals and collectively, professionally and in matters of one´s identity. A privilege for one equals disadvantage for others, and as ideology goes, intersectionality is one of the best ways towards inclusivity in feminist political movement. Historical reasons for women´s absence in the academic field of literature, are prohibitions for women to attend universities, publish books, and teach. That said, reasons for women of colors absence in the same field, are the same, but including racism as the obvious detail. Where gender and the lack of privilege because of gender should be a unifying factor for all women, we are still not on route to including as many women of color, gay and transwomen and transmen, into our schoolbooks and required readings. It is important to keep my *intersectional glasses* on, so to speak, in my analysis of *What I Loved*, a novel with characters of different genders, races and background, even if the narrator is an older white cisman. How much is filtered through the narration of Leo Herzberg, and can we trust his descriptions of experiences of our characters, or doom him an unreliable narrator, and at the same time keeping in mind the author Siri Hustvedts omnipresence, or whether she is present at all.

**Frankenstein and the subversion of the male voice**

Another novel written by a woman with a male first person narrator, is the classic *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, published in 1818. There are many similarities between *What I Loved* and *Frankenstein*, which I will elaborate on, but I will also steer away from comparing the novels. My reasons for that is that one is literary canon, already much discussed and theorized for the past two hundred years. Siri Hustvedt herself is inspired by *Frankenstein*, most prominent in her 2014 novel *The Blazing World*. The influence of Shelley’s famous work is bound to be present in countless other work of fiction, and nonfiction alike, since the early 19th century ­­– when one of literature’s most significant monster was first created– and my thesis would be a completely different one if I would strive to compare the two novels.

There are few questions I want to focus on, one being the question of creation, as a major red line in *Frankenstein*, and as something I want to highlight as a major theme in *What I Loved*. The other question, the main one, is the same one that I ask while reading Hustvedts novel: why is this novel written with a male voice?

In *Frankenstein*, there are multiple narrators, all men, with a main story structured within a framing narrative. This itself gives a sense of unreliability, as events unfolding before the reader, are told through a series of letters from one man (Robert Walton) where he is retelling the story from Victor Frankenstein’s oral account of his life, and the life of his monster. These are the autobiographical narration of three different men, with few women in them. One is serving as a receptor, an audience for these stories: Walton’s sister, whom he writes one way letters to. Other women present in the novel do not get their own voice, simply because the story is told by and *through* men. The only exception is the two letters from Victor’s fiancé Elizabeth – the only woman in the story to write without a middleman – and passages of dialogue, which again could be considered summarized and delivered by the male voices and writing.

While an obvious argument for Shelley’s choice of male narrators might be historical publishing reality of women writers – a novel written in a male voice and thus separated from the female body of the writer, would be better received by readers and critics of her time – it is more intriguing to imagine a greater purpose behind her decision. In “Frankenstein and the Subversion of the Masculine Voice”, an essay from 1992 by J. P. Davis he argues that Shelley deliberately chose to write her novel from the perspective of three men, to highlight some of the novels themes: particularly that of creation. Victor Frankenstein, being a man and thus not being able to give birth, is trying to usurp women’s role of childbearing and creating life. in his attempt to create life, he is only capable of making a male figure, monstrous as it may be, and further on cannot complete production of a female figure, in fear and repulsion of his own creation. The decision to destroy the female companion he was making for The Monster, though under threat to his own and his fiancés lives, comes from realization that the female he was making, might be able to give birth and create life herself; she might also end up being more violent and evil than The Monster, which gives us an idea of Frankenstein’s view of women as more dangerous than men, and exposing the greater misogyny behind the destruction of the female form.

Introductory, Davis writes that in telling their story within the framing narrative, and excluding women and women’s own voices, all three men and particularly Victor, are subverting the female voices. “The three men may undermine the female voice, but Shelley subverts their subversion, revealing the social consequences of their misogyny and, by implication, the broader historical effects of the masculine literary tradition that they embody”.

Davis’ essay applies psychoanalytical tools to examine various themes of subversion in *Frankenstein,* like the theme of sex, death and the role of the mother, the same tools are not important for me to bring into my reading of *What I Love*, although the theme of subversion of the voices are more applicable. One can say that Hustvedt use of the male voice is similar to what Davis claims is Shelleys motif: the reveal of the misogyny of the literary world. Perhaps, even the misogyny of men, or in society in general.

“The best evidence of the protagonists’ flight from women and of the importance of misogyny as a theme in *Frankenstein* is the systematic exclusion of women’s voices as the three men narrate their tales. Their rhetorical behavior as autobiographers attests to their own fears and loathings of value construed as feminine” (p. 313)

*What I Loved* can be categorized as an “autobiography” by Leo Herzberg, as it is written as his reminiscence of his life, a sort of memoir. As he narrates his tale, we see others in his life through the narration: the women, the children, Bill Wechslet etc. There are accounts of the Wechslers’ family life, and in part two of the novel, also the accounts of Wechsler’s son, Mark. We see it all through Leo’s eyes, and most importantly we see the women through his eyes as well.

**The Acts of Creation**

*What I love* is, more than anyting, a novel about creation. The artist Bill Wechsler creates art, Leo Herzberg is writing about artworks and eventually, when his eyesight slowly fades, recreates the artworks by memory. The children in the novel are also a product of creation, and are significant, ever present component that drives the story forward.

Difference between *Frankenstein* and *What I loved* is that the female voices are present. Although presented through Leo’s narration, we get to know their stories and their personalities. The wife of Leo – Erica, and the two women in Bill’s life – his wife turned ex-wife Lucille, and girlfriend (and muse) turned wife Violet – their stories and voices are there. Leo *watches* his wife Erica be pregnant, give birth and then care for their infant son:

“Sometimes, I would put my book down and look at the two of them in the light of my reading lamp. I now think I was lucky that I wasn’t young. I knew I what I might not have known earlier – that my happiness had come. I even told myself to fix the image of my wife and son in my mind while I watched them sleep, and it is still there, a clear picture left by my conscious wish. I can see Erica’s profile on the pillow, her dark hair falling over her cheek, and Matt’s little head, about the size of a grapefruit, turned in toward his mother’s body.” (p. 38)

It is a passage full of love, and full of *looking*, and creating a memory of a woman and her child in their most intimate form. (?)

Since the novel is as much a novel about art, as it is about people and relationships, mentioning the great, though fictional, artworks in *What I Loved* is important. I dare to argue that this is when Hustvedt act of creation is at its most powerful, letting character of Bill Wechsler to create the artworks within her work of fiction.

**Écriture feminine**

The main questions that arise in my reading, and may be going throughout my analysis, and those questions are as follow: why would Siri Hustvedt write as a man? Why not simply write *about* a man? There are several works of fiction, written by both men and women, doing the same thing: writing from a different gender’s point of view.

Simone de Beauvoir raised the question of erasing one’s subjectivity to write like a man.

(må uttdypes)

In “The Laugh of The Medusa” Cixous writes that “woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies ­­­– for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal”.

“I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man.”

Hustvedt does the opposite of what Cixous wants women writers to do, which of course can be explained simply by the fact that Hustvedt has written books with male first-person narrators. In her text, Cixous creates a framework for feminine writing that does not entirely fit to analyze *What I Loved* with, but one can also argue that Hustvedt, instead of forgoing that framework, instead transcends it. If the narrator of the book is male, is it the same as the authors voice? Although the first-person narrator is male, Siri Hustvedt is still a woman, a fact containing a debate in itself – about unreliable narrators, about her own placement in the book, whether the narrator’s language is her language – all of them are relevant for my main question.

“A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there’s no other way. There’s no room for her, if she’s not a he. If she’s a her-she, it’s in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter. “ [[5]](#footnote-5)

Bisexuality of language- (utdype)

**Interpretation as an inevitability**

It is in its place to elaborate on what this novel means to me as a reader, and why I go to such lengths as to theorize and analyze this particular work of fiction. Do I find myself reflected in the pages, as I read, in an act of recognition? If, as Rita Felski writes in her *Uses of Literature*, recognition is already knowing more than I thought, and feeling satisfied with realizing that, then it is my experience with reading *What I Loved*.

The novel is rich with intellectual abundance, on topics ranging from history of hysteria, literature, and most importantly art. The erudition of the author, Siri Hustvedt, is astounding to me. I have two degrees in art history and gender studies, and the theme of art in the novel is alluring. This is a recurring theme in Hustvedts writing, she has written extensively on art and art history in all her novels, but the way in which she *creates* art works in *What I Loved* is the first one. Hysteria, or the history of the condition, is another major theme in the novel, cleverly written in as a thesis work by character Violet Bloom. Reading about hysteria in the novel made me feel like I was learning something new, acquired knowledge about a topic as if I was reading a work of non-fiction.

1. “No Competion”, *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex and the Mind,* Sceptre: London, 2016. p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid.p.80 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Idib, p.84 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ibid p.87 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “The Laugh of the Medusa”, translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1976, vol.1, no.4, University of Chicago, p. 888. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)