

Author: Katie Johnston (329706)
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The Barriers Faced by Female Writers

Female writers have had to overcome many obstacles throughout the history of the written word. Even now, women struggle more so than men to get their work published, and, as one can imagine, in the earlier days of fiction and the novel, it was even worse.

In the 19th and early 20th century, the perspectives of women were neither sought nor appreciated; their imaginings were seen as too frilly, too girly, too uneducated and trivial. Their creative writing opportunities with the prospect of literary respect and maybe even fortune or fame were, more often than not, unavailable to them. And, most times, whenever a woman did make it past the ‘gatekeepers’ and into the glorious realm of published and acknowledged work, questions of authenticity were always raised. Mary Shelley—who was, even before she published her first novel, a recognized poet—was accused of stamping her name on her husband’s (a *renowned* poet) work, in spite of doing even the editing completely on her own. It didn’t help much that it was, at this time, widely considered a literary fiction tradition that wives should “assist” (and in some cases, completely write) their husband’s novels and short stories. But even though this was largely a trend of the past, it has greatly affected the writing culture of the present. It should be no great surprise that many women writers, often, were not given the proper credit or recognition they deserved, and the fact remains that with a female name, one could not and still cannot get very far in the field. Even today, the obstacles which women writers have to face are challenging and numerous, and that is exactly why I wanted to discuss the constraints which female writers of the 19th and early 20th century have had to endure, how they overcame them and how that relates to the struggle of female writers of today.

I have been dreaming of being a published author for a long time, and that I think is why I found this topic so interesting and why I wanted to contribute to it in some way. I would consider myself an avid reader and I have always been fascinated by writers’ personal lives, especially those of the writers of the 19th and early 20th century, given that the process of writing and publishing has evolved so extensively since then, and life was so different during those times.

The struggles of female authors from the past are still evident in the present. Male writers are still more widely recognized for their work compared to that of the “fairer sex.” The stereotypes of the 1800s greatly affected every aspect of day to day life and work for talented female writers, forcing many of them, despite their extraordinary talents, to pursue their dreams under the guise of a male name. And this silent sexism continues to affect women of today as well—in every field.

Women are not often taken seriously as writers by editors, agents or publishers. I have heard this from many female writer friends and a few of my favorite creative writing teachers as well. As a woman and an aspiring recognized and published writer, this infuriates me. I have heard time and time again that a female name ultimately throws you into the towering pile of “Womanly Fiction”, no matter the genre of your piece or the quality of your writing. There is an immediate prejudice when it comes to a female name read on a manuscript—ever noticed most pen-names don’t sound all that feminine?—and this is not something so easily remedied in the systems of our literary world. We are still stuck very much in the past, and agents and publishers would much rather hear from a man than a woman. There comes a time in many a female writer’s life—I have thought about this myself many times—where she has to decide whether to keep her name or “go male.” Even the Bronte sisters had their own, at the very least, androgynous sounding pen-names. In many genres, even literary fiction, it helps to be a man.

And, given that the writing of 21st century women is still not taken seriously or, simply, cannot reach that ‘wider audience’ because they are in fact women, makes me think that these stories of the past, the history of pseudonyms and women’s struggles are important to uncover and discuss. The examination of these cases of inequality, I think, will not only shed light on how far we have come as a society, but how much further we still have to go.

Looking back on the work of women from the 19th and early 20th centuries, I think we sometimes forget how really difficult it was even to be acknowledged beyond being a wife, a mother, or a bride-to-be. Women have had to endure many constraints, and I think in this day and age, with the current global political climate, these stories of iconoclasm are even more important to tell. I consider myself to be a writer and I think it is critical that women get the same creative opportunities as men and not have to hide who they really are to be acknowledged or to advance their careers.

The world has evolved much, but it becomes increasingly clear that ‘much’ is often not enough. There are so many voices in the world that are unheard and so many stories that still need to be told. The sky should be the limit, not your gender. That is why I chose to write about this.

My bookshelves are packed full of mostly male writers, and for a long while, I hadn't really noticed the great lack of women authors on my shelves so I will not claim to be a renown "expert" on female writers—by any means. However, last semester, I decided to take a class all about female authors with the sole purpose of reading more women and discovering more women to read, and the course certainly delivered on what I had signed up for.

I had never really thought much about the sexism in the writing industry before, and the class brought up many interesting questions on the subject of women's struggles in the field. The course has become one of my favorite writing classes I have taken thus far in my college career. The first day of class, I was not exactly sure what to expect. After everyone in the class was settled, my teacher, Ann Hemingway, asked us all what the last book we had read by a female author had been. More than half the class could not come up with a name. It happened that I had been reading a book by a female author that summer, but beyond that, I had trouble thinking of any other to cite. The last was probably *Frankenstein* or some mystery series or other, which at that point had at least been a few years prior. But throughout the course of the semester, we read an abundance of past and modern women writers. We read Virginia Woolf, Edwidge Danticat, Katherine Mansfield, Bonnie Jo Campbell, Zadie Smith, Roxanne Gaye and more female authors than I can count. It was an amazing experience and the class was very diverse and had so many different points of view and stories to share that every week there was something new and exciting to hear.

Towards the end of the semester, my professor brought up the topic of sexism in the writing industry. She said she preferred to hold off the conversation regarding the topic until the end of the semester because, "It discourages a lot of people sometimes, and that is not my goal. But you have to realize, people don't want to hear from us very often." She tried to be very genial and comical about it, and she succeeded in making something really rather depressing appear hopeful. She told us that the 'gatekeepers', some of whom she knew and some she believed to be opening their minds—"or dying out, at the very least"—controlled what stories were widely and publicly read. "Writing quality sometimes does not matter. Even if you do get past them, the public can have a very skewed view of women writers." She then gave us all a handout titled "Homme de Plume: What I Learned Sending My Novel Out Under a Male Name" by Catherine Nichols. She read Nichols' account aloud in class, in which the author describes her experience sending out her manuscript under a male name. The piece was disheartening to say the least. Catherine Nichols had hit a bit of a rough patch. She had just finished her novel and already was sending out many query letters under her own name

regarding the manuscript, but was only getting negative or lukewarm answers in reply. She started reading articles about “unconscious bias” and how employers “unwittingly” hire a man over a woman despite obviously similar qualifications, and decided she wanted to test out what would happen if she sent out the same query with the same manuscript and the same letter, but under a male pseudonym. Not expecting much, Nichols sent it out to several agents. But she was surprised to find that her male counterpart received five requests to see more of his work within the short span of 24 hours on a Saturday. Her fake male persona somehow managed to write her own book better than she had, without changing a word, and Nichols felt hopeless.

The mood in the classroom was pessimistic, when we finished reading. Ann asked if any of us had ever thought of taking a male or at least androgynous pen-name. “Sometimes you have to trick them, and then later you can let down the curtain.” She said. But in all truth, unlike many of my other classmates, it hadn’t been something I had ever really thought all that much about— at least, not to the extent of making myself out to be a man. Now, however, as I am finishing more and more pieces, and thinking more and more about trying to get short stories published, it’s something I think about constantly.

The history of pseudonyms is a very interesting one. And I will honestly say, it was not something I knew a whole lot about. I was well aware that pen-names have been a long-standing literary practice, but what I did not so much realize was that they were not only very commonly used by female writers of the 19th century, but by male writers also. Sometimes it was not just a case of hiding one’s identity, as I had perceived it before, but as a form of artistic expression as well, much like with the authors George Orwell and Joseph Conrad, who took their pen-names with no real desire to remain incognito, but to give their work a different tone. From the 1800s to the mid-1900s, if a woman wanted to gain wide recognition for her work, more often than not, she had to pretend to be something she wasn’t.

Women writers were and are, still today, often held as inferior to their male writing counterparts, even for the most *trivial* piece of information about them or their work, and are therefore treated as copycats or imposters. Emmanuel Roidis, a Greek novelist and critic, who lived mostly in the 19th century, said that women should write “about needlework and cooking,” and that if they are to address social, political or other such issues in fiction or nonfiction, they are only imitators of the male gender: a truly infuriating thing to read, but an opinion that was held by most, at the time. Pen names, however, although utilized by men for different reasons, often, helped women in breaking out of the stereotypes, which they had been forced to endure. The Bronte sisters, Mary Ann Evans,

Louisa May Alcott, Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, and Violet Paget, among countless other female writers of the 19th century, all utilized male pen-names to bring their work to the public eye in a less burdensome way. Contemporary authors like J.K. Rowling, V.E. Schwab, Christina Lynch, Meg Howrey, and Robyn Thurman all use male pen names as well, proving the point that although things have changed, they have not changed quite enough. Women are still forced to prove their worth, and their equality to men. But no matter how hard they try, female authors are often deluded into the watered down, lesser version of some male writer, an excruciating and seldom acknowledged truth which all women writers must bear. When I began searching for source materials about my topic, it began to appear that the constraints which women writers have had and still have to endure were not so commonly documented or discussed. I hit a bit of a brick wall in my research process, and it took some very granular searches to yield any helpful results at all. To witness such a lack of acknowledgement for the discrimination within the writing industry was discouraging to say the least. However, the less that turned up, the more and more I wanted to uncover, and the more I learned, the more I wanted to write.

When I was younger, I had always had this hope that the art world was separate from the rest of the world and their sexist and discriminatory values, but the gender gap is there—often blatantly. Now that I am older, coming to terms with the fact that something as simple and trivial as my gender could stop me from doing what I have always believed is my calling in life has been a difficult reality to process. Women authors have to try so much harder just to be perceived in a similar light to male authors. But despite this, there is naïve belief among the general public that the creative world is a level playing field; that it is only talent that matters and motivation that will get you there, unlike other more “traditional” fields. Just a little bit of elbow grease, and you will be just as admired and read as any other male writer. However, in the age of the MeToo movement, it has become increasingly clear that this is not the case at all, nor is it something that affects the publishing world, alone. It envelops all of the professional artistic industries in a thick shroud of misogyny and silent bigotry that seems almost impossible to combat. In the music industry, for example, less than 20% of the top grossing artists are women. In the art world, only 30% of the works of women artists are curated in galleries. In dance, only 9 out of 28 dance pieces are directed by women. In theater, only 26% of plays are written by a woman. In screenwriting and teleplays, only 15% are written by women. In the film industry, only 4% of directors are female. In the world of fashion, only 40% of designers are women. In the publishing industry, the volume of written work, whether it be a novel, short story, or essay, fiction or nonfiction, by female authors is only 28%.

It would be very easy to claim that the above statistics are only a factor of the dearth of women who choose to pursue these creative fields, but this simply isn't true. Women make up 50% of students at art schools and colleges, but in spite of this, they are underrepresented in every single artistic industry.

So why is this? Why do all these female artists just seemingly disappear? The very simple and blunt answer is that the world—inside and outside of industry as a whole—sees women as inferior, as weak, as “imitators”. There is, in the field of writing, at best, an unwitting prejudice and, at worst, a conscious one against the female gender. V.E. Schwab who has been a published author since 2011, has received literary awards and nominations, and has over 20 beautifully crafted published works, publishes her children's books under a different name—her *real* name is Victoria Elizabeth—while publishing her adult and YA fiction books under her rather masculine sounding pen-name, V.E. Like female authors before her, Schwab does not do this for artistic expression, but more so to break the glass ceiling. She writes in her FAQ on her website that she has had people say to her face that they were glad they didn't know she was a woman, or they would never have picked up her books.

Suddenly, if you are a woman, you are thrown into a subcategory; an “authoress” and not an author, “an American woman novelist” and not a novelist, a “female writer” and not a writer. The overarching affront is that works written by women are priced 45% lower than those written by men.

If one wanted to, they could trace all this misogyny back to religion, to the spreading of the Western binary view on gender roles, to the emasculation of men and the birth of toxic masculinity. But it is impossible to change what has already been done and to tear these roots from the soil. What is not impossible is to change our views, to open our minds and widen our perceptions. Every woman should be given the same opportunity as any man. Everyone should have a crack at success, a chance to accomplish their dreams, without the relevance of what is between their legs ever impacting the equation. The only way to make that happen is to try; to give equal chances and equal shots and treat everyone with the same respect. You raise your children the same way, you kill sexism at the source, you do not utter “boys will be boys” or so- and-so does something-or-other “like a girl.” You stray away from your favorite author for an afternoon and read some Margaret Atwood, some Veronica Roth, some Joyce Carol Oats. You consciously *try* to be better than you were and you are, and you raise up the voices of those around you who are unheard. This does not mean picking equality over talent or never buying a book from a male author ever again. It means simply that sometimes you must question your actions, you must read the manuscript even if it has a female name printed on it, you must suspend your prejudices for the intrinsic value of art. This does

not apply just to the agents, the publishers and the editors and to those gatekeepers in all their closed-minded glory up on their ivory towers, but to the average consumer of the written word, walking down an aisle of a bookstore. Change begins with growing voices and strong actions. It begins with attention, an open mind, and a listening ear. It takes time and patience, but it is all worth it.

So I challenge you, next time you're wandering through a bookstore or scrolling through Audible or your Kindle with the taste for something to read, pick up a female author, support the voices of women around you. Trust me, you will not be disappointed.

Annotated Bibliography:

Nichols, Catherine. "Homme De Plume: What I Learned Sending My Novel Out Under a Male Name." Jezebel, Jezebel, 4 Aug. 2015, jezebel.com/homme-de-plume-what-i-learned-sending-my-novel-out-und-1720637627.

In "Homme De Plume: What I Learned Sending My Novel Out Under a Male Name", Catherine Nichols discusses her anxieties and frustrates with the writing industry and their sexist bias and views. She talks about her experience sending her manuscript out under a male name and what they experience provided her.

Ciuraru, Carmela. "The Rise and Fall of Pseudonyms." The New York Times, The New York Times, 24 June 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/books/review/essay-the-rise-and-fall-of-pseudonyms.html.

"The Rise and Fall of Pseudonyms" explores the history of pseudonyms and its effects on women writers, exploring who wrote under pen-names and why they did so.

Howell, Samantha. "The Evolution of Female Writers: An Exploration of Their Issues and Concerns from the 19th Century to Today." English 351, University of Hawaii Honolulu, Fall 2014
[https://hilo.hawaii.edu/campuscenter/hohonu/volumes/documents/
TheEvolutionofFemaleWritersAnExplorationofTheirIssuesandConcernsfromthe19thCenturyto
TodaySamanthaHowell.pdf](https://hilo.hawaii.edu/campuscenter/hohonu/volumes/documents/TheEvolutionofFemaleWritersAnExplorationofTheirIssuesandConcernsfromthe19thCenturytoTodaySamanthaHowell.pdf)

In her essay, Samantha Howell examines female writers' struggles in the writing world, the issues and biases they faced and the sexism within the writing industry. She discusses not only the issues American writers have faced, but writers from around the world as well.

"Women in Literary Arts." VIDA, www.vidaweb.org/.

The VIDA survey is a website dedicated to tracking the publishing and reviewing of works by female-identifying authors. Each year, they show percentages of how many women have been reviewed and published, as well as how much they are paid.

Crum, Maddie. "Women Writers Face Major Hurdles, Especially In Bestselling Genres." HuffPost, HuffPost, 31 May 2017, www.huffpost.com/entry/women-writers-face-major-hurdles-especially-in-bestselling-genres_n_592dd993e4b055a197cde4ff.

In her article, Maddie Crum examines the struggles of female writers in genre fiction and the hurdles they face. She interviews authors on the issues they have had to overcome, and discusses organizations that are trying to help them overcome the issues.

Fard, Farah Joan. "Women Outnumber Men At Art Schools - So Why Isn't Their Work Shown?" Bustle, Bustle, 17 Dec. 2018, www.bustle.com/p/women-outnumber-men-at-art-schools-so-why-isnt-their-work-being-shown-in-galleries-once-they-graduate-55299.

In Farah Joan Fard's article, she examines the lack of women represented in art galleries despite their large enrollment in art schools.