

Letter from America

Autumn 2014

Just before the Spring semester, I received an email from a student I had not yet met. We were soon to begin several months together in Introduction to Fiction Writing, a class that attracted mainly first-year students.

I just wanted to give you a heads up on something before class starts. I identify as a genderqueer person and I use gender neutral pronouns. So instead of referring to me as “he/she” or “him/her”, please use the singular “they” instead. It is totally understandable if you slip up a few times as I do often appear quite feminine, but I really appreciate your effort in this as it makes me pretty uncomfortable when people refer to me using female pronouns. If you find neutral pronouns to be overly cumbersome, I would also accept my name used in the place of pronouns. Thank you so much for your consideration.

The phenomenon wasn't new to me. I teach at a very, very liberal institution. But never had my own student requested that I use they in the classroom.

The term gender neutral refers to a person's identity rather than to sexual orientation or physical traits, as I had thought the first time I heard it. The person may be biologically male, for example, and wear a sundress over broad shoulders and hairy arms and legs. This isn't an attempt to appear feminine. The person may be attracted to women. Or men. Or both. That part is irrelevant. Rather, the point is, as I understand it, to challenge the binary values that “he” and “she” represent. Why should this biologically male person be expected to embody “masculine” values like dominance, competitiveness, aggression, etc.? Why do our values and appearances have to be handed to us in pre-packaged gender bundles? Can't we pick and choose?

The students raised questions that I'd asked myself sometimes at the bathroom mirror while I applied mascara, styled my hair. Why was I doing it? Was it for me or for others? Who were these others? Why did I do it on days when I wasn't even leaving the house? I'd spent many precious hours of life on primping. Maybe I had internalized cultural pressures so fully that I could not discern society's preferences for my appearance from my own. Were they one and the same?

I'd read about studies that suggested that people treated male and female babies differently, encouraging male babies to be more independent, take more risks. Certainly, gender was the first thing that people wanted to know about a baby. Why? And what were the implications? In an indirect way, did this binary treatment account for serious problems that women tended to face later – domestic violence, higher rates of lifetime poverty, and poor representation in leadership positions?

It was exciting to imagine a world in which one's sex wasn't a predictive indicator of prosperity or wellbeing. Maybe it was possible. In my own lifetime, attitudes toward gay and lesbian couples had transformed, for example. We'd had gay neighbors when I was growing up in the seventies – a couple of guys in beards and khakis and tennis shoes who looked like my dad. It confused me that these guys lived in secrecy and fear. It was baffling that it took so long for society to see, for the umpteenth time, that people are people, no more and no less.

So I entered the classroom enthusiastic. I noticed, though, over the weeks, that I couldn't bring myself to use "they" to refer to the student. I told myself that the issue was that it created singular/plural disagreement, which was confusing, and I used the student's name instead in order to avoid pronouns all together.

In colloquial speech, we might say, "If a person has fewer than ten items at the supermarket, where should *they* check out?" This isn't grammatically correct, but it isn't confusing. We understand that *they* refers to an indeterminate person, some vague and abstract so-and-so.

However, it would seem odd, even in colloquial speech, to say, "If Sally has fewer than ten items at the supermarket, where should they check out?" The problem is that it suggests that several more people have somehow entered the scenario. Once a particular person is named – a real and identifiable human – the pronoun becomes singular. So I couldn't bring myself to gesture to the student and say, "Does everyone have Sally's story? They brought a copy for everyone in the class."

Over time, I realized that it wasn't mainly the poor grammar or the confusion that troubled me. Rather, it bothered me, from a symbolic perspective, to refer to a particular person with a pronoun that was usually reserved for a faceless nobody. Weren't we trying to highlight individuality?

Things got more complicated when a small group – pals of the gender neutral student – started writing stories using "they" to refer to the (singular) main character. As is typical of stories by eighteen-year-olds, the work was not especially clear or developed, even aside from the pronoun issue. However, with the confusing pronoun, it became impossible to understand the literal particulars of what was happening, especially when several characters were in a room together, as they often are in stories. A line like, "Erin looked startled when they stabbed Jeff" could set a person dizzy. Wait. Who? Are all five of the people we just met together? Two of them? I thought the man in the chicken suit had the knife. Did I misread that?

The workshop discussion of these stories was stilted, punctuated by long silences. Finally a guy who sat on the other side of the room from the group that wrote the gender neutral stories, a guy who appeared traditionally masculine in Levi's and a rugby shirt, would be the one to pipe up. "Look, I'm not trying to be political, but they is confusing. I have no idea what's happening."

The friends of the person who wrote the story shot to its defence. "Well, maybe it should be confusing. And maybe some people are just too closed-minded to get that." Nobody wanted to be some people, and so if others agreed with the guy in the rugby shirt, they kept their traps shut.

When I'd tell my own friends what was happening in my class, they'd say, understandably, "What did you do about it?"

I flushed with shame every time I said, "Not that much." I'd been ineffectual. I did acknowledge the perspectives of both parties, but I did little to mediate, to bring new understanding – which was my job. In order to facilitate a meaningful exchange, though, maybe I would have needed to have some clarity myself on the issues. And I simply didn't. What was the middle ground between singular and plural? Was there such a thing as quantity

neutral? Maybe the students would tire of writing these stories, and I could pretend none of this ever happened.

But they didn't. We continued to receive stories featuring gender neutral characters, sometimes with no names. "As Natasha and Hank stole the car, they laughed menacingly and threw their head back, and then they threw the briefcase of money to Taylor, and their blood, which resembled dark Kool-Aid, sprouted onto the side of Dylan's face, and Taylor stepped backward unsteadily like a drunk stork. They couldn't believe it!"

When I tried to suggest adjustments to minimize confusion, such as giving the reader clues on the first page that the main character was gender neutral and self-identified as they, the small group of students howled in protest. It was important, they said, to let readers be uncomfortable. Wasn't it also important, I asked, that people be able to follow what was happening? The students simply folded their arms, like *You just don't get it*.

If I resisted the use of they to refer to one particular individual, was it a political statement? Was I positioning myself with the likes of the Westboro Baptist Church? It was how the small faction seemed to regard the guy in the rugby shirt. When I sided with him, which I tried to do – gently – sometimes, I felt like some purse-lipped, nineteenth-century school marm, which was itself a misogynist stereotype, one that portrayed women as petty.

But if the minutiae of language were petty, students wouldn't have seen transformative power in pronouns in the first place.

Even though I'd been teaching for two decades and could navigate many complex situations like the pro I was, I'd found myself off-kilter. On the one hand, I was hopeful about the prospect of a post-gender world, and I wanted to support the students' pursuit of that. On the other, I believed that fiction had the potential to transform readers, allowing them to become other people, to inhabit characters' lives. A story could change something in us, a tectonic shift in our internal landscapes toward something more stable, more hopeful, more empathetic. Studies, like one reported in the New York Times, even proved it was true. www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

However, this shift could only happen if we made it possible for readers to enter these worlds, crafting clear and luminous prose, like runway lights. If the students did this, if they made it possible for readers to "try on" the life of the gender neutral character, wouldn't this, too, be a way of effecting change?

It would haunt me later that I never dealt with the issue in a satisfying way that semester. What should I have done? What should I have said? What will I do the next time? The nice (and also difficult) thing about teaching is that there's a next time. Maybe my real mistake wasn't the failure to reconcile my own conflicts, but the failure to share my struggle. After all, the students shared theirs. The student/teacher relationship is another binary – we have preconceived ideas about the roles we should play. Maybe, though it is humbling to admit, there were more parts of the status quo at stake than I was ready to release. Here's to next time. Who knows? Maybe I'll finally find out what happened to Natasha and Hank.

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