

## Challenging the Norms Through Language: Unveiling Gender Duality and Identity in Tempest's Hold Your Own

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### Abstract

Language plays a fundamental role in literature, particularly poetry, in shaping and directing the reader's interpretation of the hidden meaning portrayed by the poet. In regard to this phenomenon, this study examines the construction of gender duality in selected poems written by Tempest in the anthology entitled Hold Your Own through a qualitative content analysis method utilizing retroactive reading and a purposive sampling technique. By juxtaposing the denotative and connotative meaning through the lens of linguistics and literary analysis, this research is theoretically grounded in Riffaterre's Semiotics and Butler's Gender Performativity theory. The data consist of thematically and strategically selected lines that reveal nuances of linguistics and literary patterns in representing gender identity. Findings demonstrate that feminine identities are predominantly articulated through lexemes or phrases correlated to softness, passivity, and negative light such as "watching them", "school bench", "be kind", and "witch" meanwhile men are characterized by more assertive, dynamic, and power figure words such as "playing", "football", "kick", "BMW", and "above her". The duality of gender is further illustrated through recurrent grammatical deviations such as "how many of yous", "boy in her", and "herself top boy" as well as frequent deployment of figurative devices such as simile, paradox, symbolism, hyperbole, and metaphor, one of which is "her shoulder is square". This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways linguistics and narrative strategies in Hold Your Own perform a fluid and complex gender identity, thereby engaging the myth of Tiresias and the contemporary discourse of gender.

Keywords: gender duality, femininity, masculinity, gender determination, and identity

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### Introduction

It has been broadly known that the relation between language, literature, and identity is something unbreakable. According to Abdulrahman, all those aspects are stylistically interwoven to produce such a literary work [1]. Specifically, as stated by Saussure, language becomes the medium to express, shape, and construct one's identity, which is then represented in a literary text. Literature, similarly, serves as a vital tool to understand one's self-representation by prompting readers to reflect on their subjective realities, as mentioned

by Culler (2005) in Jesudas and Gayathrri (2024) [2]. To shape identity in literary works, Vygotsky (1978) stated, there must be an enhancement of interpersonal interactions and cultural influences.

Aquino and Salvador (2024) has conducted a research which explores the interrelated roles between text, author, and reader in forming identity through literature. They found that interactive dialog between these three aspects have contrubuted to the formation of personal and collective identities, expanding the understanding of world among people. Eventhough they are not specifically addressing literature in form of poetry, this study has proved that literary works hold fundamental role in constructing identity.

Another research conducted by Jesudas and Gayathrri also found that the theme of identity, loss, belonging, and love of Sylvia Plath's poems, is also illustrated through poets portrayal of world in the poetry where people shape their identity and utilize coping mechanism in response to societal context of individual identity. Although this research focusing more on loss and love theme-related, differ from this research which focusing on gender issues, it is still revelant to be referred to as it has similar main discussion.

Concerning identity itself, various disciplines have studied the interconnected relation between the use of language in literary works to portray identity. As stated by Salvador et.al (2024), the constructions of identity refer to a dynamic and intricate process that is fostered by multiple factors, including cultural, social, and individual experiences [3]. One of the major issues regarding identity represented in literary works is gender.

As cited from Butler (1990;2004), gender is an attribute that people apply to themselves based on determined characteristics and functions, beyond what is called sex and sexual orientation [4]. He argues that gender is a tenuous constitution in relation to time and space that is exteriorly instituted by stylized repetition acts [5]. If, under certain conditions, someone could not preserve his or her assigned characteristic, i.e, a man becomes less masculine than he is supposed to be, repeatedly, the community would consider them to be "less". For this reason, people with particular condition where they can alter their identity of gender depending on their surrounding, personally or and socio-culturally, will lead to what Muzakka (2021: 4) has defined as gender fluidity [6].

According to Katz-Wize (2016), gender fluidity refers to the identity which is typically fits below non-binary and transgender umbrella where people assigned to those can identify themself unmatched with their born sex [7]. In some occasions, people with this condition might end up in a situation where they cannot state their fixed gender anymore, leading to changable identity and duality of identity. Similar to this, Almann and Hnit stated that identity is fluid, means it is socially constructed and never be fixed or and pre-determined [8]. They argue that identity is something evolving, shaped not only by one self but also social dimensions and relations. Therefore, in recent era, people with undefined identity, fluid gender, and or those who tend to feel excluded by what community has been adopting as

identity in general often use implicit and intrinsic media to present themselves. One of those is poetry.

Voigt (1987) has stated that poem or poetry is one of literary works that is genderless, means that this literary text is not involved, influenced, and or engaged to one particular beliefs or disbelief and does not define the author, readers, and anyone else as more or less masculine or feminine [9]. Instead, it focuses on the reflection of realities in and out the poetry itself. In particular, this research explore the notion of femininity, masculinity, and duality of gender through Kae Tempest's selected poems in the anthology of *Hold your own* as it is bases not only by the realm of the world but also interconnecting the myth of Tiresias as cultural representation of non-binary gender.

In Indonesia, the publicity of literary works with non-binary gender themes is mostly in the form of novels. However, the focus is only on gender transition from male to female (calabai) without any reversal to the previous gender, as in the concept of gender fluidity. Therefore, data is taken from anthologies of English poets with the aim of examining the dynamics of an individual's gender transformation, so it can be used as a study material in facing gender-neutral situations in conservative countries like Indonesia. Furthermore, previous studies have focused on the perspectives of characters or poetry subjects regarding themselves as non-binary, whereas this study focuses on symbols that express the subject's identity in a particular gender, the changes, and the acceptance of the fluidity itself.

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## Method

In general, this study is a research using content analysis method. According to Zuchri (1993:6), content analysis is a form of analysis used to understand symbolic messages in the form of documents, paintings, dances, songs, literary works, articles, and other forms of unstructured data[10]. The data units to be analyzed, according to the semiotic concept by Riffaterre, include matrices of words, phrases, or simple sentences capable of forming particular meanings [10]. The data units in this study focuses on words, phrases, or simple sentences within the scope of continuous lines and stanzas. This study is inductive research based on the concept of phenomenology. A problem becomes the starting point of critical thinking in this study. This critical thinking is then supported by finding accurate and relevant data related to phenomena that are actual and factual. Subsequently, the data are grouped based on certain criteria to limit the focus of the problem. The selected data are then analyzed initially through heuristic and hermeneutic reading to determine preliminary claims related to the description and initial analysis of the data. In addition, this study is an interpretative study because the data used are literary discourse interpreted based on signs of meaning.

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first identification in this study aimed to determine the forms of linguistic and symbolic elements used by Tempest in his poetry as a representation of a specific gender.

**He was above her**

His elbows dug into the grass

She was scowling at me

**Her hair was long and sweaty**

— Snakes in the Grass: 8-14 (Childhood)

The poem employs rich and evocative imagery, particularly through its depiction of setting and physical elements, to intricately convey themes of sexual desire and intimacy. The detailed sensory descriptions, such as the image of sweating hair and the naked physicality of the lovers, vividly manifest the raw and unfiltered nature of their sexual encounter. The choice of placing this scene deep within a forest, surrounded by dense trees and underbrush, is not merely a backdrop but serves as a powerful metaphorical frame that heightens the sense of secrecy, primal instincts, and naturalness associated with the act. Symbolically, the poem's title, "Snake in the Grass," operates on multiple interpretative levels. Drawing from mythological symbolism, where snakes often represent potent sexual energy and forbidden desire, the image encapsulates both the allure and the danger intrinsic to the lovers' tryst. This symbolic use aligns closely with Lohmann's (2008) research, which situates serpentine figures within a broader cultural and mythic discourse on sexuality, power, and transgression [11].

**She** stuffed a **pair of socks** down my pants

And straddled me and **called me a big boy**

— Girl Next Door: 3-4 (Childhood)

The phrase "big boy" refers to the character "I" and connotes the phrase "stuffed socks down my pants," where a neighbor (playmate) manipulates him by placing socks resembling testicles in his pants, making him seem like an adult male. As what Butler (1990) has stated, the performativity of one's act can determine their gender [12]. According to The Free Dictionary, "big boy" means (1) something large and attractive and (2) slang for an appealing sexual condition in men. This act can be seen as social manipulation, as the character — only seven years old — does not understand the situation, indicating the neighbor's influence and deception.

It was **lunchtime** and the **boys were playing football**

The **girls sat on benches** beside the field and **watched the boy**

— Bully: 3-4 (Childhood)

The poem excerpt "Bully" uses pronouns like "her" to signal gender and satirizes gender roles and stereotypes through linguistic elements, such as "boys" paired with "football" and "girls" with "watched the boys," showing girls as passive observers. This critiques societal norms that confine boys to active roles and girls to passive ones, highlighting how language reinforces gender stereotypes. Symbolically, "lunchtime" and a "bench" depict gender-based

grouping, where girls are expected to sit and watch rather than participate, reinforcing passive roles. The bench metaphorically represents societal expectations limiting girls' activity, contrasting with boys' engagement, deepening the poem's critique of gender norms in everyday school life. Butler criticizes social norms that enforce binary gender categories and uphold patriarchal structures (Butler, 1990;1999;2004). Tempest's critique targets harsh and dominant masculinity as well as the oppression of women through historical objectification and criminalization [5].

Born more **brawn** than most  
Born storm  
You could tell she wasn't from  
The same place as **the rest**  
Born **strong**  
Born **wrong**

— The woman the boy became: 1-10 (Womenhood)

The character "she" is depicted as muscular (brawn), warm, connected to ghosts, and associated with storms, which presents a complex characterization. Although the character is female, the use of "brawn" creates a contradiction because, as Rendall (2017) explains in *Brain vs Brawn: The Realization of Women's Comparative Advantage*, the term "brawn" is generally linked to males due to its association with physical strength, with women typically assumed to have less of it. Tempest challenges this stereotype by assigning "brawn" to a female figure, emphasizing her as having "more than most," meaning she possesses greater muscularity than other women, which disrupts conventional gender norms. This depiction suggests that muscle is an intrinsic part of the female character's identity, symbolizing masculine traits within her. Importantly, "muscle" here extends beyond physicality to metaphorically represent ideas, intellect, and capability. Through this representation, Tempest subverts traditional gender binaries by blending physical strength with mental and emotional power, offering a more fluid and nuanced understanding of gender identity and empowerment [13]. [13], [14], [15], [16]

When she was young, **a boy who climbed**  
On top of **girls to feel grind**  
And how **she fought** so she could find  
**Herself top boy**

— The woman Tiresias: 29-32 (Womanhood)

In this excerpt, gender fluidity is symbolized by the pronoun "she" paired with the noun phrase "a boy." The pronoun "she" refers to Tiresias as a woman, indicated by the potential hypogram throughout the poem, while the boy represents two entities: the character's past self, marked by the past tense verb "was," and another entity involved with the character in a past life. The description of the boy frequently climbing onto girls to feel friction metaphorically implies an intimate and aggressive physical interaction. The verb

"climb" conveys aggression, which implicitly causes the character to struggle to become the "top boy." The phrase "herself top boy" carries a dual meaning. The reflexive pronoun "herself" pertains to the female Tiresias, consistent with the poem's initial pronouns. The first interpretation depicts a woman claiming a dominant masculine position, supported by the narrative of her struggle to achieve this status. The second interpretation reveals the character's gender fluidity – originally a boy who engaged in intimate play ("climb for grind") and now a woman who strives to maintain her identity as the "top boy." Tempest's juxtaposition of "herself" with "top boy" symbolizes the fluid transition and coexistence of masculine and feminine identities within the character [14], [15].

**Matcho** man; ate cars for breakfast

**Natural** man; skin the same texture as cactus

— The man Tiresias: 30-31 (Manhood)

Tempest employs extensive hyperbole as a symbolic device to depict masculine traits. For example, the line stating that a masculine man "eats cars for breakfast" exaggerates hyper-masculinity by emphasizing male aggression, strength, dominance, and toughness. This contrasts with gentler terms such as "dinner" and "washing dishes," reinforcing traditional stereotypes of masculinity as resilient and hard. Additionally, Tempest uses simile to portray another form of masculinity – the natural man – described as having rough skin like a cactus. The phrase "natural man" highlights societal stigmas that associate masculinity with hardworking and protective qualities, reflecting cultural expectations of men as family providers whose labor is symbolized by rough skin (Salviana and Soedarwo, 2021:8) [16]. The comparison to cactus skin, known for its strength and protective function, serves as a powerful symbol of resilience and dedication as masculine attributes.

From these analyses, it can be concluded that the central theme of the poem *The Man Tiresias* concerns the transition and stigma of masculinity. The transformative aspect of gender is expressed through motifs such as suddenly becoming male and inhabiting a new body, unlike the original. Meanwhile, masculine stigma is represented in figures of men who can "eat cars for breakfast" and possess skin as tough as a cactus. Tempest realizes these ideas through various rhetorical devices, including similes like "his body like was not his" and "skin texture as cactus," hyperbole such as "macho man ate cars for breakfast," metaphors like "to the edge of clearing" (which symbolizes the phase of cleansing or acceptance during transition), "writhed in jaws," and "huge crowds behind him," along with symbolic diction including "teeth," "new shape," and "body."

Be all that you are, all **women all soft.**

**All man. All soft. All flesh. All bone. All organ.**

— Man Down: 27-28 (Manhood)

In this excerpt, the most prominent feature is the repetition that creates rhyme using the word "all." This is a symbolic element where Tempest attempts to create new meaning by modifying the sound of the word. First, the emphasis on "all woman" and "all man" marks the

poet's firm statement on gender inclusivity. Second, the focus on "all soft," "all flesh," "all bone," and "all organ" highlights physical existence, referring comprehensively to the biological body beyond specific social categorizations [17]. Words such as "flesh," "bone," and "organ" bring the reader back to the concept of humans as physical beings, irrespective of their social constructions. Additionally, the phrase "Be all that you are" is a call for the wholeness of identity. In *Tempest's* non-binary context, this can be read as an encouragement to break free from the constraints of limited gender identities and to celebrate oneself in all diverse forms. In this excerpt, the most prominent feature is the repetition that forms a rhyme using the word "all." [18]. This repetition serves as a symbolic element through which *Tempest* seeks to create new meaning by modifying the sound of the word. Firstly, the emphasis on "all women" and "all men" acts as a firm statement by the poet advocating for gender inclusivity. Secondly, the focus on phrases such as "all soft," "all flesh," "all bone," and "all organ" stresses the physical existence of the biological body in its entirety, transcending any specific social categorization. Words like "flesh," "bone," and "organ" remind the reader of the human being as a corporeal entity, regardless of societal constructions [19], [20].

We used to **burn women** who had epileptic fits.

We'd tie them to a stake and **proclaim them a witch**.

— Progress: 70-71 (Blind Profit)

*Tempest* once again delivers a sharp critique of gender construction and the moral views of social communities toward women. The reference to the burning of women suffering from epilepsy as "witches" serves as a displacing mechanism, highlighting how medical and social deviations of women throughout history have been criminalized by patriarchal structures [21]. However, the poem then reverses this historical logic by showing how new forms of repression have emerged in modern media. Instead of being literally burned, women are now publicly objectified visually if they meet the standards of sexualization, as expressed in the line "if they've got nice tits," where "tits" refers to breasts. Yet, a beautiful or sexy appearance—anything commodified by the market—does not guarantee a woman's well-being, as they will still be torn apart socially if they "slip" or reveal weakness, complexity, or lose control over their image.

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## CONCLUSION

Utilizing linguistic and semiotic analysis to identify the gender fluidity of the protagonist in *Tempest's* poetry, there are in general four phases mentioned namely, childhood to adolescence, becoming a woman with strong femininity and lesbianism, becoming a man with a duality of masculinity and femininity, and finally a blind priest who challenges binary gender norms. *Tempest* employs linguistic elements such as pronouns, distorted verbs, symbolic imagery of moods and animals, rhetorical language, and slang to create new meanings, while symbolic elements include metaphors, paradoxes, hyperboles, and allusive diction. The first chapter focuses on social stigma and discrimination between superior male



and inferior female genders, highlighting peer influence and cultural expectations; the second explores situational fluidity through lesbianism and bisexuality; the third emphasizes gender duality and internal conflict with non-exclusive attraction; and the final chapter critiques and calls for the deconstruction and reconstruction of rigid gender norms to represent diverse and changing individual identities.

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