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# BOOK REVIEWS

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Elsa Nettels. *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton, and Cather*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997. 214p.

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Elsa Nettels's overarching project here doesn't seem particularly innovative or new; her book is an investigation of the ways in which the dominant literary discourses of turn-of-the-century America (fiction and the literary criticism of influential periodicals) create, refine, and perpetuate linguistic gender distinction and inequality. Perhaps her most significant contribution occurs in her consolidation of ideas about language and gender by dominant literary "voices" of the era, and in her subsequent exploration of how these ideas are challenged or reinforced through the fiction of four of the major "voices."

One of the accomplishments of Nettels's book is its fairly thorough tour of sites where gender and literary criticism intersect. Her synthesis of these intersections leads her to conclude that women were in a double-bind at the turn of the century: their uses of language were considered by many to be inherently inferior to men's, but they simultaneously had tighter restrictions on those uses and more stringent expectations regarding them. From this conclusion, Nettels explores how four of the most influential literary writers of the era demonstrated a complex awareness of the effects of this double bind, and then traces their responses to these effects within their fictions.

The chapters on each of the four main authors—William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and Henry James—contribute insight into each author's own thinking about gender, as evidenced from their critical writings and reviews, as well as instructive close readings of their characters' use of language in gendered ways. Nettels details Howells's skepticism of the naturalness of gender restrictions together with his reaffirmation of those restrictions; she finds in James a gender progressivism tempered by the author's reverence for the balanced order of social hierarchies and his personal anxieties regarding the literary marketplace; she traces the effects of Wharton's linguistic elitism and conservatism on her analyses of gender in the upper classes; and, perhaps most fascinatingly, she reveals Willa

Cather's masculine identification, repeatedly demonstrated in the author's reviews, and makes connections between that identification and profound differences between Cather's male and female first-person narrators. The last substantial chapter in the book is devoted to a study of turn-of-the-century Utopian fiction's imagined gender constructs and the ways they ultimately reinscribe many traditional roles, due to a lack of shrewd analysis of the effects of gendered language on systems of gender.

I found considerable value in the multitudinous examples from what must have been painstaking archival research, particularly with respect to turn-of-the-century literary periodicals and reviews. However, in the first chapter, titled "Language and Gender in Victorian America," Nettels finds it necessary to situate that research within a framework of generalizations about a long history of gender oppression [e.g., "From the fourteenth century to the twentieth, books of conduct and etiquette instructed women to . . ." (12)], which tends to undermine the value of the particularity and specificity of her research.

The book draws heavily from traditional narrative theory in its emphasis on characterization and narrative point-of-view. Nettels's own writing style is self-consciously "accessible," but perhaps at the expense of a potentially deeper theoretical engagement with gender that might take into account other factors such as the role of race and other social hierarchies in the formulation of "gendered" language. This absence represents perhaps the most provocative aspect of the book, which otherwise, in its thoroughness of coverage of each author and consolidation of substantial archival references, provides ample material for exploring the ways gender and language intersect during the era. ✱