

A LOST PERSON IN NOME
A (VERY) SHORT STORY BY NATHAN PICKLE

I woke up underneath an oak tree. I blinked a few times, lying there on my back in the cool grass, and stared up into the leaves dancing in the breeze, with the warm sunlight flickering green and gold as they moved. A pleasant scene – but how on earth did I get there? My thoughts grew more coherent, and more alarming, as I tried my best to recall how I had fallen asleep under that great swaying tree. Anxiety energized me and I sat up, scrunching my brow into a disconcerted frown. I decided to leave the park and walk back to town (at least, I hoped there would be a town) in an effort to jog my memory.

I followed the gravel path out of the park, where it turned into a sidewalk that graciously led further and further into a comfortable little town. The sidewalk that I followed was not in a state of disrepair, but there were quite a few cracks with stubborn weeds peeking through the concrete. Cars, most of them older and yet unfamiliar to me, ambled down paved roads whose age seemed to match that of the sidewalk I was following.

I continued walking past streets, cars, and buildings that held only vague meaning for me. I recognized their familiar shapes and colors, the way that every person in the world knows a town when she or he sees one, but yet they had no names or identifying features that my mind would recognize. Growing desperate, I went into the first cafe I found that looked inviting.

The interior of the small cafe gave me the same impression as the rest of the town: familiar, like something I had known, and yet not the same at all. Some old armchairs were gathered around a small table near the front windows, while other tables and their chairs took up space along the walls. At the back of the room was a bar, where the barista, in conversation with a customer, leaned casually on the counter.

“Excuse me,” I asked, pulling the door closed behind me. “I was just driving through, but I think I took a wrong turn somewhere. What town is this?”

I didn’t feel like confessing that the real reason I was lost was a severe attack of forgetfulness. Plus, it seemed like a small enough town that, if my memory really was the problem, they just might recognize me. Narrowing the problem down to either insanity or amnesia would at least be progress.

“Well, friend,” the barista answered back, “there’s not exactly one name for this town. There are a few similar ones floatin’ around, and I suppose ‘Nome’ would have to be the root of all of ’em. But mainly each person just calls this town whatever shery¹ feels like callin’ it.”

Again I got the feeling, while listening to the barista behind the bar, that even the speech in this town almost sounded like my own, and yet more weathered, somehow.

“You don’t look so good – why don’t you come have a seat and I’ll get you some coffee?” The barista motioned toward a stool next to the other customer. I accepted the invitation as the barista continued, “If you’re lost, the place you ought to go is the church down the street. They have maps and information for visitors in town, and they’re very helpful. And of course,” the barista continued, placing a paper cup of steaming hot coffee in front of me, “the good Lord does

¹Pronounced “SHEAR-ee”

whatever shery pleases, and I'm sure shery'll take good care of you while you're lost, seeing as how the Lord's a strong, nurturing, loving kind of Being."

I took a sip of coffee. I was feeling more confused than before and still had no idea where I was. I shook my head and blinked a couple of times, took another sip, and got up to leave as the barista was wiping up the counter. As I opened the door, the barista called out, "Thanks for stopping by! I hope you find your way back to wherever it is you're trying to go."

The other customer also piped up. "Oh, and also, if you stop by the church, there should be someone working the front desk. Shery can direct you to just what you need!"

I thanked the barista and the stranger for the advice and the coffee, and stepped out onto the sunny sidewalk with my coffee in hand. I walked down the street to the old-fashioned looking church building, complete with a steeple and a cross. I ventured inside and looked around, but there was no one to be found. I didn't see any maps lying around, so I shrugged my shoulders and decided that I might as well keep moving on.

As I walked past the empty front desk, I wondered to myself who in the world the desk worker was supposed to be.

APPENDIX A: MY ARTIFACT, A PRONOUN

There are two main types of words in the English language: form-class and structure-class. Form class words include nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, and these comprise the English lexicon.[4] New words are continually being added to this class of words. Especially in modern society, the need for new nouns and adjectives is insatiable due to the constant influx of new inventions and technology. These names and descriptors are quickly and easily added to the popular vocabulary.

Pronouns, on the other hand, belong to the kind of words called structure-class words. This is a closed set of words: a new pronoun has not been added to the English language for several hundred years. [4] Pronouns are used for the purpose of referring to a noun that was specified earlier in the conversation. Pronouns have no real meaning of their own, but rather are used to refer back to an antecedent.

Modern English pronouns are largely derived from their Old English forms.[3] These are given in the table below:

Case	Singular		
	Masculine	Neuter	Feminine
-			
Nominative	he	hit	heo
Accusative	hire	hit	hie
Genitive	his	his	hire
Dative	him	him	hire

The neuter form ‘it’ that exists today is a form of the Old English ‘hit’ that has been weathered through the ages. Likewise, the modern ‘he’ is clearly inherited from the ancient language. The feminine singular nominative is different, however: it traces back to the Middle English ‘sche,’ which in turn grew out of the Old English definite article ‘seo.’[5]

There has been a movement during the last 200 years that favors adding a new pronoun to English grammar. This movement is largely due to the rise of feminism in the West, and proposes that the new word be gender-neutral in order to replace the traditional ‘he’ as the conventional unmarked gender. It is considered inappropriate to use ‘it’ when referring to a person, as it is typically a proxy for an inanimate object or an animal. The plural ‘they’ may be used as a singular pronoun in certain English-speaking regions, but it is not universally accepted.[1] Those who propose a new genderless pronoun suggest that using ‘he’ as the unmarked gender is residual sexist language, although many predecessors of English were much more explicitly gendered.

It is important to remember, also, that grammatical gender is not only masculine and feminine, as in Spanish and French. Greek, Latin, and German include a neuter form, and Swahili utilizes six different genders, none of which has any relation to sexual gender.[4] Grammatical gender is not identical to physical gender, yet gender in language does contribute to the meaning that

can be expressed. Use of masculine and feminine words in a gendered language can help the speaker characterize his subject.

Gendered languages require that the gender of a subject and the articles, pronouns, or adjectives used to reference it must agree. It is interesting to look at the types of things identified by masculine words and those identified by feminine words. In the German language, masculine nouns include male humans and animals, names of days of the week, months, seasons, stones, and the cardinal directions. Feminine nouns are female humans and animals, most trees, flowers, small animals, and insects. Gender neutral nouns include names of countries and towns, metals, and letters of the alphabet.[2] It is evident from these that the gender of a noun does not necessarily have anything to do with the thing described, but it may have some connection.

It was out of this history of proposed change, gendered language, and the subtle meanings of words that I set out to invent a new genderless pronoun. I selected 'shery' because it followed in the vein of Tolkien's theory of language. In his story "Farmer Giles of Ham," Tolkien creates an elaborate tale that leads to an explanation of the origin of certain words and names that he was familiar with.[6] In the story he describes the way that words become degraded over time as they are used in the vulgar vocabulary. The most common English example that came to mind is the contraction "y'all" that has become like a new pronoun in its own right.

My intent was to take modern English and extrapolate it into the future, imagining the ways that the language could become worn down over the years. I knew that I wanted to invent a pronoun, so I started thinking about possible ways that a new word might come into existence. The reasoning that made the most sense to me was this: there is a strong emphasis on political correctness in our society, and in the future there may be strong social pressure to use 'he or she' or 'she or he' instead of the traditional 'he.' If 'she or he' was used frequently, people would surely get frustrated. It is a cumbersome phrase that is awkward to use. Some sort of contraction would certainly result from this, and the words would become slurred together. 'Shery' seemed to be a likely candidate for what would develop. It preserves most of the significant sounds from the three smaller words, and makes sense that a 'y' would be added to the end to make it more phonetically correct. 'Shere' simply does not look like that pronunciation that would accompany it. I also considered 'shiry,' 'erse' 'sheree,' and 'sere' before finally deciding on the form of my artifact: shery (pronounced SHEAR-ee), the ungendered singular nominative pronoun.

APPENDIX B: THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

While thinking about my project, it occurred to me that the most significant implication of having a genderless pronoun would be its use in relation to God. It is generally understood that God has no literal gender (though Jesus did), and yet much of the language used to describe God is masculine or male in nature. I wanted to find out what the theological implications would be if God were no longer explicitly associated with the masculine, and so I began reading about the history of pronouns used to identify God.

The Hebrew texts typically describe God in masculine terms. Hebrew has two genders, masculine and feminine. English translations neutralize much of this gendered language, and the pronoun ‘He’ is often all that remains in passages where the Hebrew reader would have read much more explicitly masculine imagery. The tetragrammaton, the name by which God identified himself to the Israelites, was a masculine noun. This is significant because first person pronouns are not gendered in Hebrew, but the second and third person are. The tetragrammaton is always referenced by masculine pronouns in the Old Testament.[4]

This leads to some difficult and complex arguments. First of all, we have the fact that God is not a bodily deity. Although he is often personified as masculine, feminine words and concepts are also used to portray God in scripture. For example, in the Psalms the imagery of a mother bird is used to describe God’s affection for and protection of his people. Also, God refused to allow the Israelites to divinize sex. They did not partake in the fertility worship and rituals that their neighbors indulged in.[4] It seems readily apparent that God did not wish to be viewed as a sexual entity, but rather a being who is above sexual distinctions.

Despite God’s elevation above physical sexual categories, we must also account for the fact that God *created* sexual characteristics. The Lord is clearly not opposed to the sexual act or distinctions between the sexes or he would not have created males and females separately.

In addition to these considerations, we must also remember that God has been primarily identified as ‘the Father’ for centuries. Jesus did not refer to his heavenly mother when he spoke of God; surely the abundance of references to God as paternal must be beneficial to our understanding of his character in some way. Relations between man and woman, Christ and the church, God and the universe: the symbols of God’s love that are displayed throughout the cosmos are so numerous that it can be difficult to differentiate between them.

A further difficulty is that the English word for ‘God’ descends from Norse and Gothic words that are neuter gender.[4] Since English is not gendered, many of the associations of God with masculinity have been bestowed through connotations. Why have the masculine images stuck?

Throughout my work on this project and the reading that I did to research it, I was constantly wondering why God is so often portrayed in masculine terms. Even when feminine nouns or images have been ascribed to God, they rarely suggest *female* characteristics. Rather, images are used that are very

motherly, symbols of affection or protection or guidance. Personally, I have always considered God to be 'He' when I reference him. Learning that some people suggest referring to God as 'God/ess' or 'she' made me seriously question the reasons that I view God the way I do.

APPENDIX C: REFLECTIONS ON ‘SHERY’

This has been an incredibly rewarding project. I am afraid that I was not able to convey even half of the ideas that sprung into my head during my research because I do not have the time or space to record them here. Nonetheless, creating a genderless pronoun has had far greater effects on me than I could have ever expected from a five-letter word.

The idea came to me as a result of annoyance more than anything else. I was working on some homework for a math class, and one of the problems was worded in a such a way that, to be politically correct, the author was forced to write the phrase ‘him or her’ instead of using a simpler and shorter word. I started thinking how easy it should be to invent a new pronoun to allow us to avoid the entire problem. What could be the difficulties? Pronouns are short – surely it would not be hard to create one. And as for disseminating it throughout the English speaking world – that is what Youtube was created for! It all seemed so simple.

Then I started researching.

I discovered that people have been searching for ways around the gendered pronoun problem for many years, and no amount of complaining or clever contraction of words has been successful in adding a new pronoun. I found myself a newcomer to a game that has been going on for a very long time.

I also started to think about the implications of having such a word at our disposal. I would create it purely out of frustration, in the search for an easier way to say the things I want to say. However, it might end up causing further confusion of gender roles and identities. It would be very easy to communicate negative and discouraging things to a person by using a genderless word, when I have meant to provide a word that would simply denote personhood.

Most complicated of all was the theological aspect. God has been seen as the Father for centuries, but there are people who wish to remove gender from any reference to God. What would be lost if this happened? Surely there are benefits to identifying God with a father, a man who is a key figure in the lives of many people. I realized that what seemed like a grandiose idea to improve the English language was beginning to look more and more like the One Ring.

Despite my struggles with theology, philosophy, and linguistics (I am definitely not an English student), I had a great time creating my artifact and was able to really get into the Tolkienian spirit. Some amateur theological and philosophical musings, a bit of dabbling in linguistics, and daydreaming in a quiet corner of the library – I hope that Tolkien would be proud of my attempt to mimic his way of inventing words and speculating about the intentions and lives of the people who would use those words.

I also discovered some of the appeal that Tolkien must have found in linguistics. Words are incredibly powerful: I realized this when I read through several books dealing with the use of pronouns in relation to God. It only takes two or three letters put together a certain way to convey meaning that cannot be contained in many many volumes. I also stumbled across some books dealing with speaking different languages. Old English and the Germanic languages

have a very distinct character, and reading those words or trying to muddle through pronunciations gave me a feeling of being in the presence of something very ancient and deeply rooted in meaning.

So now I have come to the end of my jaunt into Tolkien's world. I hope that next time you are referring to a professor, politician, astronaut, or bus driver, if you find yourself in a situation where you need to say 'he or she,' bring 'shery' to mind, and all of the things that go along with it.

Bibliography

- [1] Gender-neutral pronoun. Wikipedia article, 2009.
- [2] Charles Duff and Paul Stamford. *German for Beginners*. Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1960.
- [3] Douglas Harper. Online etymology dictionary. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php>, 2001.
- [4] Donald D. Hook and Alvin F. Kimel Jr. The pronouns of deity: A theolinguistic critique of feminist proposals. In Jr. Alvin F. Kimel, editor, *This Is My Name Forever: The Trinity and Gender Language for God*. Intersarsity Press, 2001.
- [5] Robert J. Kispert. *Old English: An Introduction*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971.
- [6] J.R.R. Tolkien. Farmer giles of ham. In *Tales From the Perilous Realm*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008.