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# Femininity and female sexual desires in “The Lang Women”: an analysis using Halliday’s theory on transitivity

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## Abstracts

This article deals with the linguistic representation of and the relationship between femininity and female desires and needs in Masters’ short story “The Lang Women”. Based on Halliday’s theory of systemic functional linguistics, particularly Transitivity, this story is examined for what it can tell us about how Masters represents and explores female desires and needs in her work. In particular the article focuses on Carrie’s consideration of her own physical attributes. The article also discusses Masters’ view of the relationship between femininity and female sexual desires and how Masters’ work can be read as a common on debates about female sexuality and its depiction current at the time of her writing. The article then claims that through female sexuality women can expand their self, agency and social status.

**Keywords:** Halliday, Transitivity, Femininity, Women, Sexuality, Sexual desires, Olga Masters

## Introduction

This paper is an account of one of major themes in the writing of Olga Masters, using a discourse analysing method based on systemic functional linguistics. The paper aims to show that by using discourse and textual analysis it can reveal how female sexual desires and needs were represented in Masters’ short story “The Lang Women”. In this paper, Masters’ linguistic representations of female sexuality and needs in her work was considered not simply to strengthen a political point on women’s equality, but because the themes of femininity and female sexuality are important but under-examined in Masters’ work.

There are several critiques that her stories focus too much on women’s familial and social subjectivity then they fails to articulate her own sense of gender representation or express a feminist sensibility (Daniel, 1985; Wallace, 1984). These studies are mainly from socio-literary perspectives. However, this paper, with attention to her linguistic representation, challenges the current understanding of Masters as an ‘ordinary’ writer of ‘ordinary’ stories about ‘ordinary’ characters and then offers the possibility of re-envisioning the representation of femininity and transforming values of traditional feminine attributes. From the above points, it is worth investigating whether the women linguistically depicted in Olga Masters’ fiction adopt the desired behaviours for

being appropriately feminine, accepting of domestic roles or on being feminine in a modern way, fighting for their own desires.

One effect of this linguistic representation suggests that Masters employs female sexuality as a means of making her character portrayals more intensely personal. She writes about aspects of sexuality in a manner which corrects the perception of sex/sexuality as something distasteful and immoral but is exploited as a means of gaining agency and dominance in human interrelations.

### **Olga Masters – A woman writer of women topics**

Olga Masters 1982 was born and raised on the south coast of New South Wales, Australia. She became a phenomenon of the Australia literary scene during the 1980s. Though she started writing fiction in her fifties and had only 4 years to flourish due to her brain tumour, her books gained critical acclaim. Her particular brand of low-key, smooth-running prose has won her considerable admiration (Anderson, 1988; Coleman, 1990; Goldsworthy, 1984; White, 1990). The domestic themes of her stories mainly set in rural country towns located her in the tradition of Australian story-telling where the characters, especially the female ones, were squeezed by poverty and hardship and they were trapped within patriarchy and social norms (Edelson, 1987; Jones, 1990).

The themes and subjects of Masters' fiction are various, but often they engage with issues of women's domesticity and female sexuality: the daily effect of feminine roles in women's familial and social life; the claims of bodies and sexuality as a potential means of empowering them and the portraits of women seeking to achieve agency and self-representation (Jones, 1987; Matthews, 1988; Wallace, 1984). Masters' stories are about the intense and private lives of women and girls. She writes all the time about women – very young women, very old women, and the sort of women they are between the states. Reading Masters' fiction reveals a central preoccupation with the varied ways that female sexuality can function to control and identify individuals, but also to empower them.

Among Masters' stories, "The Lang Women" carries a strong representation of female sexual desires and needs. The female protagonist in the story shows concerns to sexuality: Carrie as a self-gazing woman with feminine beauty: she is young, full, and appealing like *'a ripe cherry'*. Carrie always admires her own body. Masters' linguistic representation of Carrie's physical appearance and actions illustrates the protagonist's femininity and female sexuality.

### **Research methodology**

The current paper employed the methods and the suggested set of linguistic tools adapted from Halliday and his associates' theory on Transitivity to find out how female sexual desires and needs were depicted in Masters' "The Lang Women". So far, there have appeared numerous stylistic investigations into Transitivity in literary narratives for this aim.

One of the most influential studies in stylistics using this method is Halliday's analysis of William Golding's *The Inheritors* (Carter and Stockwell, 2008:19). In this work, Halliday (1971) shows how the patterns of Transitivity in three selected passages of the novel demonstrate the limited knowledge and vulnerability of the main characters.

Similarly, in a Transitivity analysis of Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*, Ji and Shen (2004) demonstrate that the model of Transitivity can function as a useful tool in revealing the process of a character's mental transformation. In her book *Linguistic, Language, and Verbal Art*, Hasan (1985) analyzes the poem "Widower in the Country" by Les Murray, showing how the author's linguistic choices express the theme of the story and points out features of language as prominent and meaningful in the depiction of the protagonist who is depicted as still grieving for the loss of his wife.

For the current research, it focuses on showing the results obtained when dealing with verbal processes, participants involved and the circumstances in which the actions happen so as to provide a more detailed account of the process types by which the characters are described. In so doing, the texts were first broken into clauses and a detailed analysis was undertaken to identify the choices taken by Masters in depicting characters, events and circumstances.

There were reasons for choosing the clause rather than the sentence (also known as the clause complex) as the unit of analysis. The first reason is that in systemic functional linguistics the clause is the most fundamental unit of grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 10). In every clause, each type of meaning is expressed by its own structures which come from the observation of that clause as: (a) a linguistic representation of our experience of the world via transitivity structures; (b) a communicative exchange between participants via means of mood structures; and (c) an organised message or text via means of thematic structures. David Butt and his associates claim that for the realization of our ideas, clauses usually express our experience of the world in terms of things and events and the different circumstances that surround those events (Butt et al.2000: 36).

Another reason for choosing the clause as the unit of analysis is that the clause is an efficient unit for observing the text. Halliday, whose grammar of English was ultimately motivated by the need for systemic accounts of language choices made in literary works and other pedagogical applications, justifies the focus on independent clauses in his *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Halliday, 1994), saying that a clause and a text are similar in many different ways, namely both have structure, coherence, function, development, and character. He stresses that a clause is a kind of metaphor for a text - and a text for a clause. Writers have choices with independent clauses: they can choose to write them as simple sentences, existing on their own, or they can string them together, with or without (coordinating or subordinating) conjunctions. Let us consider the following example:

LW33a. *The rest of the little town knew about the bed time ritual* // (LW33b) *since Walter Grant the postmaster rode out one evening* // (LW33c) *and saw them through the window.///.*

This clause complex consists of three clauses. Each clause is identified by two upper case letters indicating the story, Arabic numbers indicating the number of its clause complex in the particular extract, and alphabetic characters indicating its clause number within the clause complex. Thus, for example, Clause LW33b above is the second clause in the 33rd clause complex in "The Lang Women". In order to comply with "one main verb per clause" rule, each main verb of the clause

complex becomes a governor of a distinct clause. Then ambiguity is sometimes associated with the matter of what constitutes the main verb of a clause. If there is only one verb in the clause the analysis normally proves relatively direct as in “*she started her talk about the routine*” in which *started* would typically be classified as a material process. If however, there is more than one verb in the clause the second non-finite form is categorized as the main verb and thus as the process element, as seen in the example “*she started to smile...*” in which *smile* would be assigned the behavioural process which, though accurate, even so is not without lacking a degree of detail. Therefore, decision of the main verb in a clause during transitivity analysis at clause level draws great consideration otherwise misinterpreting the theme of the text is inevitable.

In line with these pointers on the essential function of a clause, the texts were divided into clauses, and this allowed the researcher to mark up and manipulate the texts for closer analysis. Then, the main results of the analysis are reviewed. For that purpose, the current paper attempts to systematically explore observable linguistic features at both lexical and grammatical levels, and evaluate them quantitatively and qualitatively. The intention is also to investigate occurrences quantitatively and then to set up the dominant semantic preferences of lexical elements. These quantitative and qualitative patterns then serve as an investigation on how language is used by the writer to portray reality and to answer the question of how language users make selection from the complex structures represented by the language to produce appropriate texts and to offer a particular angle as interpreting these texts. In a simpler way, the analysis will serve to show what and how linguistic patterns are constructed by Masters to achieve the writer’s point of view.

#### **Data selection**

One of the research concerns is the quantity of texts on which to carry out linguistic analysis. The choice of how many texts to focus on was vital: a decision had to be made to concentrate either on a huge quantity described in broader detail, or on a smaller quantity described in finer detail. The selection of a smaller data set was made due to time and technical constraints, since this research aims to quantitatively analyse several linguistic features in a given time span.

The next step was to select the extracts from the chosen story “The Lang Women” for investigation. First the researcher carried out a close reading of the story to familiarise herself with it. She selected the sections in which the contested features of femininity appeared as prominent themes. Since extracts were selected on the basis of generic and semantic features, with the idea that each extract would provide a whole episode or coherent story segment involving the story’s leading theme of femininity and female sexuality. Therefore, 142 clauses selected from the short story “The Lang Women” comprise a coherent section of the story in that they represent an episode where the central character Carrie acts and reflects on her own body, and this in turn depicts her as having an active engagement with her own sexuality. This trait also reflects the full depiction of the main character, one of the Lang women that the story is about.

Here is one of the chosen extracts from the story “The Lang Women”, which the researcher investigated to discuss the features of femininity and female sexuality:

*Carrie was like a ripe cherry with thick black hair cut level with her ears and in a fringe across her forehead. She was squarish in shape not dumpy or overweight and with rounded limbs brown from exposure to the sun because she and the grandmother Jess also a widow and the mother of Carrie’s dead husband worked almost constantly in the open air on their small farm which returned them a meagre living. Carrie was nicknamed Boxy since she was once described in the village as good looking but a bit on the boxy side in reference to her shape. When this got back to Carrie she worried about it although it was early in the days of her widowhood and her mind was not totally on her face and figure. Some time later at night with all her clothes off and before the mirror in the bedroom she would frown on herself turning from side to side trying to decide if she fitted the description. She thought her forehead and ears were two of her good points and she would lift her fringe and study her face without it and lift her hair from her ears and look long at her naked jawline then take her hands away and swing her head to allow her hair to fall back into place. She would place a hand on her hip, dent a knee forward, throw her shoulders back and think what a shame people could not see her like this. “Not boxy at all,” she would say inside her throat which was long for a shortish person and in which could be seen a little blue throbbing pulse. She shook her head so that her thick hair swung wildly about then settled down as if it had never been disturbed. “See that?” she would say to her mother-in-law. (p.94).*

This extract was chosen because it illustrates Masters’ careful selection of language features and their role in achieving a broader literary effect. At the first glance, the extract only gave a detailed description of a woman who cares for her own physical appearance. However, when these choices in linguistic patterns were investigated, the extract implies more than that: the woman’s actions suggest her longing for a freer life, not being bound by patriarchal conventions – the woman wants to prove herself and assert her identity (further details will be provided in the next sections).

It should be noted that there was no attempt to make either random or exhaustive selections that could be taken as representing all of the types of Masters’ writing in a statistical sense. Instead, the researcher made deliberate choices of sections which she wished to combine in terms of linguistic features, having already identified these sections as ways of illustrating strategic choices in dealing with a dimension of femininity that was of interest. As a result, other parts of Masters’ work in which she perhaps shows different types of language use do not negate the results found here, because for the argument made by the researcher, it is enough to demonstrate her strategic motivation for choosing linguistic strategies in achieving the thematic choices already identified.

### **Analysing data**

For the purpose of the present study, a linguistic analysis of Olga Masters’ writing was conducted. Information gathered from Masters’ “The Lang Women” was analysed to build up a general view of her protagonist. The analysis was conducted by examining

extracts from the story. The analysis took place along two dimensions: an analysis of the representation of the main character through the process types and participant roles and circumstantial elements by which they were represented; as well as explaining issues associated with their personalities, thoughts, and feelings. The data were investigated both quantitatively and qualitatively. These quantitative and qualitative patterns then served as an investigation into how language was used by the writer to portray the reality of her fictional characters.

Together with it, the researcher carried out a study of transitivity using Halliday's systemic functional framework which involves answering the question of how language users make selections from the complex systems provided by the language to produce appropriate texts and to offer a particular angle on interpreting these texts. In other words, the analysis will serve to show what and how linguistic patterns are constructed by Masters to achieve the writer's point of view.

The systemic functional approach, which is most relevant to the purposes of this study, refers to a functional linguistic model based on the works of Halliday and his associates. As mentioned earlier, the system of transitivity deals with how clauses are organized to express *ideational* meaning (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). That is, the distribution of process types, participants, and circumstances in a text construct a particular slice of reality. Analysing these patterns of transitivity reveals how literary texts construct characters and setting. According to Halliday's theory, a transitivity analysis which will reveal how the activity is represented, particularly what type of process signifies the activity, what participants get involved and how, and in which circumstances the activity. In particular, the level of agency attached to participants introduced in the discourse may indicate whether these participants have an active or passive role in the activity. With transitivity, a close analysis of lexicon and grammar can be obtained: as J.R. Martin claims "it allows us to ask questions about who is acting, what kinds of action they undertake, and who or what if anything they act upon" (Martin, JR 2000: 276). This means that the type of transitivity patterns present in a text can create a picture of how an activity is depicted in that text. Thus a transitivity analysis is felt to be sufficient for the purpose of this paper, which is to explore how Masters represents femininity.

### **Theory on transitivity**

The system of Transitivity identifies the experiential meaning and captures how reality is constructed by different linguistics choices (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 170). With Transitivity, a deep and close analysis of lexicon and grammar can be obtained as (Martin, et al. 1997: 276) claims "it allows us to ask questions about who is acting, what kinds of action they undertake, and who or what if anything they act upon". While Kress (1976: 86) states that Transitivity is representation in language processes, Simpson (1993: 88) asserts that Transitivity refers generally to how meaning is represented in the clause. (Martin, et al. 1997: 102) describe Transitivity as "a source of construing our experience in terms of configurations of a process, participants, and circumstances". They claim that Transitivity can show how speakers/ writers encode in language their mental reflection of the world and how they account for their experience of the world around them.

In Halliday's Transitivity, different processes are distinguished according to whether they represent actions, speech, states of mind or states of being. Those are identified and classified as Material processes, Relational processes, and Mental processes (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 168–248). Material processes of Transitivity are processes of doing, usually physical and tangible actions such as *dig, write, repair, send*. Mental processes usually encode meanings of mental reactions such as perception, thoughts and feelings such as *see, think, believe, hate*. Relational processes (e.g. *become, belong, get*) construe the relationships of being and having between two participants. There are three subsidiary process types that share the characteristic features of each of the three main processes (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 248). Behavioural processes reflect physiological and psychological behaviours such as breathing, laughing, sneezing...; Verbal processes represent the art of saying and its synonyms; Existential processes prove states of being, existing, and happening.

To do functional linguistic analysis or Transitivity analysis, it is necessary to identify the process or action that a clause expresses, whether there is a conscious individual doing the action to another entity (these participants are named 'agent' or 'affected' correspondingly), or whether the action is one of saying, thinking, or feeling, etc. It is then needed to make out patterns in the use of these processes and their supporting elements. In a nutshell, carrying out a Transitivity analysis often involves three elements: the process type, its participants and the circumstances which involve them (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 176). Because of this complexity of its encoding, Transitivity is not as easily visible to practitioners or readers as other linguistic features. It is not just the things that readers can see or feel by only looking at a text. Therefore, Transitivity requires more conscious effort for readers to analyse it.

In fact, Transitivity consists of more complex categories and the outline above does not cover all aspects of Halliday's complicated systemic-functional-grammar system. However, this presentation suffices for the present purposes, where one of the aims is to map Masters' functional choices in "The Lang Women".

### **Snapshot of the story "The Lang Women"**

In a tiny little country town of New South Wales live three 'Lang women': Jess - Carrie's mother-in-law, Carrie, and Lucy - Carrie's daughter, who is still a child. Both Jess and Carrie are widows. They do not have men-folk in the family and the farm is their only source of income so they have to work on their farm themselves to provide a living for each other. Bedtime becomes the time when they can admire their lives and bodies: Carrie looks into a mirror at various times, posing and styling her hair, and comparing what she sees in the mirror with an image she has in mind. One of the motives for gazing at herself in a mirror is that she is trying to convince herself that she is not '*boxy*' and to see what I would argue is "sexual" in herself. Partway through the story, it is revealed that the local townspeople refer to the Lang women's evening perusal of their bodies as a '*cock show*'. The only reason people in the village know about their '*cock show*' is that one night when the rain was very heavy, the local postman rode down from the village to warn them that their property could be flooded. Because the two widows were enjoying the storm and had left the curtains open and the light on, the postman could see their bodies '*blooming golden*', afterwards referring to it as a '*cock show*'. Carrie's physical features and her actions depicted in Masters' "The Lang Women" illustrate her femininity and female sexuality.

**Findings and discussion: A transitivity analysis**

The extracts from “The Lang Women” selected for Transitivity analysis comprise two sections from the story, a total of 142 clauses. These excerpts include 57 clauses in which Carrie is a grammatical participant, and constitute 40% of the total number of clauses in the data.

In regards to the investigation of “The Lang Women”, one can notice that Carrie’s textual world is predominantly construed in terms of Material processes – *lift, study, take, place, dent, and throw*, and then Mental processes of *think* and *thought* and Relational processes – *was*. Looking at Table 1, out of 57 existing processes in which Carrie appears as a participant of the actions performed in the analysed texts, 31 are Material processes and 12 are Mental as opposed to eight Relational, four Behavioural and only two Verbal processes.

Master’s dominant choice of Material processes in Carrie’s texts helps to reveal the nature of her actions by depicting rather typical appearance-related activities such as lifting hair, posing and acting provocatively with her body. Carrie contemplates her image in the mirror, trying to perform body assessments on herself with ‘*all her clothes off*’. Let consider the following examples:

- LW20c. *and she would lift her fringe*
- LW20d. *^she would study her face without it*
- LW20e. *and ^she would lift her hair from her ears*
- LW20f. *and ^she would look long at her naked jawline*
- LW20g. *then ^she would take her hands away*
- LW20h. *and ^she would swing her head to allow her hair to fall back into place.*
- LW21a. *She would place a hand on her hip,*
- LW21b. *^she would dent a knee forward,*
- LW21c. *^she would throw her shoulders back*

In the data under investigation, all of the activities performed by Carrie comprise attention given to her own body, hair, and her face, through actions such as “*lifting (her fringe)*”, “*swinging (her head)*”, “*throwing (her shoulders back)*” and so forth. Notably, however, in “The Lang Women”, these Material processes take on an additional role, because Masters employs this series of physical acts and poses as a representation of both Carrie’s body itself and Carrie’s internal acts of evaluating and re-evaluating her body’s appeal.

**Table 1** The Transitivity representation of Carrie in the extracts of “The Lang Women”

Types of Processes	Roles of Carrie	Frequency of distribution	Percentage distribution
Material	Actor	31	54%
Mental	Senser	12	21%
Verbal	Sayer	2	3.5%
Behavioural	Behaver	4	7%
Relational	Token	2	3.5%
	Carrier	6	11%
	Total	57	100%

Masters' assignment of Carrie in a series of Material clauses reveals Carrie's concerns of her feminine beauty. Always described as good looking but 'boxy' in reference to her shape by the local people, Carrie becomes a bit worried but then after exploring her naked body when the night comes, she feels proud of it. As can be seen in the above examples, the image of Carrie is portrayed as practicing different physical positions like "swinging her head" (LW20h), "placing a hand on her hip" (LW21a), and "denting a knee forwards" (LW21b) to make sure that she possesses potential sexual attractiveness. In looking at herself, she is judging herself against all the images that people stamp on her. She considered that "her forehead and ears were two of her good points". In many cases, women sometimes do not feel happy with their own bodies, especially in relation to weight and some even feel distress at seeing their own images in a mirror (Jackson, 1984: 186). It is different in the case of Carrie. After practising many best positions to show off her body, she draws the conclusion that her shape is "not boxy at all". Masters' employment of the phrase "not boxy at all" in Carrie's conclusion proves Carrie's confidence and pride of her appearance.

Masters' description of Carrie's performing self-discovery illustrates that Carrie becomes more aware of herself. She can find the pleasure of watching her own body and she tries to present herself positively. She spends time looking in the mirror while she experiments with posing, and creating different hair styles, which is reflected in her involvement in a series of Material processes such as *swinging (her head)*, *placing (a hand on her hip)*, and *denting (a knee forwards)*. She carefully observes, surveys, and regulates her behaviour, facial expressions, and body language. When being called 'Shorty' instead of 'Boxy' by Arthur Mann – the neighbour, her immediate response is to correct him. But right afterwards she feels regretful as shown in the following clause:

LW116. *She was annoyed with herself for saying [Boxy].*

In this incidence, the Attribute "annoyed" is used by Masters to emphasize Carrie's awareness of her body. This suggests that Carrie's body image influences her subjectivity and the sense of self such that she is willing to accept her body as it is. This may imply Masters' suggestion that beauty is all about feeling beautiful, no matter what your body measurement or shape is.

It will be seen that Material processes are characterised by the inherent participation of the Actor of the action, "the one doing the material deed" (Halliday, 1994: 103). There might also be a Goal, "a participant impacted by a doing, the one done to or with". In the excerpts, there is an important sequence of clauses in which Carrie is mapped into both the Actor role and the Goal role in each clause, as shown in Table 2 (Note that in Table 2, words introduced by a caret (^) represent either retrieved ellipsis, or the implied Subject of a non-finite clause with a nominal finite verb to provide a clearer meaning).

As an Actor in these examples, Carrie is sketched by Masters as applying direct influence on her body, particularly her face, hair, hips, and shoulders. By so doing, she then becomes the Goal of her own sexualizing actions. Specifically, being the Actor and also the Goal of her own actions constructs Carrie as thinking about her personal appearance and appeal through the categories that the others have applied to her.

**Table 2** The relationships between Carrie as an Actor and parts of her body as Goals

	Clauses	Actor & Goal relationship
LW20c	and she <b>would lift</b> her fringe	Carrie affects her fringe
LW20d	and ^she ^ <b>would study</b> her face without it	Carrie affects her face
LW20e	and ^she ^ <b>would lift</b> her hair from her ears	Carrie affects her hair
LW20g	then ^she ^ <b>would take</b> her hands away	Carrie affects her hands
LW20h	and ^she ^ <b>would swing</b> her head ...	Carrie affects her head
LW21a	She <b>would place</b> a hand on her hip,	Carrie affects a hand
LW21b	^she ^ <b>would dent</b> a knee forward,	Carrie affects a knee
LW21c	^she ^ <b>would throw</b> her shoulders back	Carrie affects her shoulders

These patterns suggest that Carrie carries out the effects on her own body parts with the aim of creating a new and different look to herself and becoming more attractive and confident with her own image.

Apart from describing Carrie’s body-posing activities, Masters also depicts her beauty in several Relational clauses where Carrie acts as either Carrier. According to Halliday, Relational processes relate the participant to his/her identity or description by means of two different modes, attribution and identification. This can be verified in the following clauses in which the relational clause type is constructed on the basis of a Carrier + Attribute relation:

LW13a.	She	<b>was</b>	twenty-six
	Carrier	Attributing Relational	Attribute
LW15.	Carrie	<b>was</b>	like a ripe cherry
	Carrier	Attributing Relational	Attribute
LW16a.	She	<b>was</b>	squarish in shape not dumpy or overweight
	Carrier	Attributing Relational	Attribute

With the Attributive Relational process in example [LW13a] “*She was twenty six*”, Carrie is depicted by Masters as at the most beautiful age of her life - the most productive and fertile age. At this age, she is assumed to be a ‘mature woman’ whose beauty and female sexuality are developed to the full. In the following examples [LW15] and [LW16a], the importance given to the Attributes “*like a ripe cherry*” and “*squarish in shape*” reflects the value that is granted to women’s appearance in their social representation in Masters’ texts. By ascribing aesthetic values to Carrie through the employment of several Relational processes and their Attributes as above mentioned, Masters is helping to create an ideological frame of reference into which Carrie is supposed to fit where she is predominantly appraised in terms of her physical attributes. Such a gendered representation created by Masters helps to reveal the ideological position of women in a society that classifies them so often according to their looks.

A further analysis of Transitivity patterns used by Masters, particularly Mental processes, indicates that Carrie is really concerned about her appearance. In the data under investigation, Carrie is involved in twelve Mental processes as can be seen below:

LW13c. (...and it as the only time in the day)// when she **could enjoy** her body.

LW18b. (When this got back to Carrie) // she **worried** about it...

LW19c. <sup>^</sup>she<sup>^</sup> **was trying to decide** // (if she fitted the description.)

LW20a. She **thought** // (her forehead and ears are two of her good points)

LW21d. ... <sup>^</sup>she **would think** // (what a shame people could not see her like this.)

In these examples, Carrie is depicted by Masters as “worried” about the nickname ‘boxy’ that is given to her. However she is still very optimistic about it. In fact, she can “enjoy her body” every night – she finds pleasure in posing and observing her own body during the bedtime. She can even spot several positive points on her face, for example, “her forehead and ears are two of her good points”. These handsome facial features together with her body bring her so much confidence and subjectivity that her inner thoughts state it is a pity her beauty is not felt and recognized by the local people as seen in [LW21d].

With two Behavioural processes below, Masters reminds readers of Carrie’s curiosity about her own physical body and sexual fantasy.

LW19a. ...she **would frown** on herself // (turning from side to side.)

LW20f. <sup>^</sup>She **would look** long at her naked jawline.

In [LW19a], Carrie ‘[frowns] on herself turning from side to side’ to explore her body which she herself believes does not look ‘boxy’ at all. After styling her hair for a while, she continues studying her face, particularly her ‘naked jawline’. Though living in an all-female family, with male absence, and the Mann neighbours (referring to both the family name and gender) some distance away, Carrie, with a woman’s instinct, loves her own body and wants to prove that she is sexy and beautiful. She likes being sexually attractive in others’ eyes.

Women’s embodiment is presented by Masters as being linked to elements of life that in themselves are tangible and material (Jones, 1987; Edelson, 1987). In “The Lang Women”, Masters’ linguistic representation of Carrie’s embodied materiality is frequently linked to gazing at the body. This gaze includes both watching her own body and behaviour, and being watched. Carrie’s body has been watched by herself every night and by men twice: once by Walter Grant, the local postmaster, and once by Arthur Mann, the neighbour. One stormy night, Walter Grant rides down to Carrie’s house to warn them of the coming flood and that their cattle should be evacuated. Because the Lang women leaves the curtains open to enjoy the storm, Walter Grant can see through the windows “Carrie’s body blooming in the lamplight”. On the way back the vision of “Carrier’s rose tipped breasts, the creamy channel between them, her navel small and perfect as a shell” causes him to squeeze his buttocks together. On another occasion, Carrie encounters Arthur Mann when she is in the corn paddock and Arthur is working on the fence. Though Carrie is well covered with an old print dress, her femininity and sexuality still make Arthur imagine her “naked body”.

Obviously, both these men are described by Masters as being aroused by Carrie’s nude body, whether it is in plain view in the case of the postmaster or imagined by Arthur Mann. The interesting point is that Masters lets gazes play over Carrie’s body but she does not condemn these as indecent behaviour. Through these details, Masters’ description of Carrie reveals her sexual desires and the gazes from two men put Carrie in a conventionally feminine position: of being looked at and objectified such as Gilbert

comments that Masters' women are controlled and disciplined by men and "they can be played with, teased, and tormented..." (Gilbert 1988: 174). However, instead of supporting this traditional stereotype of women, Masters expresses her feminist view by disapproving of it. The evidence is that Masters depicts Carrie's definite and immediate reaction to these two men's gazes: she either "*rushed to fling [the curtains] together*" or "*took off her hat and held it hiding the neckline*" so as to shut their eyes from observing her body. Apart from that, through the men's responses to Carrie's sexual appeal, Masters then manifests that Carrie's female sexuality actually influences the two men. The analysis of Masters' linguistic employment in the story shows that Carrie does have certain power and it is the power attained from male attention to her sexual appearance.

By linguistically depicting the male gazes on women (on Carrie) and the self-directed gaze of the individual woman on herself (Carrie gazing on her own body), Masters may show disapproval of the negative judgements of the social gaze and of women's sexual appeal and status. To a certain extent, as in Palmer's views (Palmer 1997), Masters' depiction of a naked female body (in this case of Carrie's) demonstrates an expression of emancipation, rather than the consequence of patriarchal gaze control. Like Carrie, Masters' central female characters often struggle within the societies in which they live and cope with the familial and social constraints that are imposed on them.

One interesting point is that along with observing her own body every night or being watched by men, Carrie is also described by Masters as engaging in the process of gazing at men, in this case Arthur Mann:

LW106a. *Almost without thinking*

LW106b. *she walked back to him.*

LW107a. *He is a man,*

LW107b. *she thought*

LW107c. *remembering Jess's words with a difference inference.*

LW108. *His buttocks under old, very clean well-cut breeches quivered with the weight of a fence post [[he was dropping into a hole.]]*

LW109a. *He had his hat off*

LW109b. *lying on a canvas bag that might have held some food.*

LW110a. *Jess might have wondered about the food and the thought of a large clean fly-proof Mann kitchen*

LW110b. *but Carrie chose to look at Arthur's hair [[moving in a little breeze like stiff bleached grass]] and his waistline [[where a leather belt shine with age and quality anchored his shirt inside his pants]].*

In [LW110b], by using Behavioural process "look at", Masters directs Carrie's gaze at Mann's hair, buttocks, and waistline - very sexually related parts, which emphasizes Carrie's female sexual desires and needs. Her desires are further illustrated by the contrast in the reactions of the two Lang women (also two widows) towards Mann: Jess who is known to be good at managing the house might think about food and a large clean kitchen and so for her: Mann symbolizes a kind of financial security. In contrast, Carrie who has great concerns about her physical attributes decides to roll her eyes on Mann's buttocks, hair, and waistline

and for her: Mann means something sexual and attractive. Clearly, Carrie is depicted by Masters as being sexually attracted to Mann.

In terms of Verbal processes, Carrie is found to be involved in only two instances as follows:

LW22b. (*“Not boxy at all,”*)// she **would say** inside her throat //(which was long for a shortish person // and in which could be seen a little blue throbbing pulse.)

LW24b. (*“See that?”*)// she **would say** to her mother-in-law.

In the example [LW22b], Carrie is realized by Masters as Sayer and the projected clause *“Not boxy at all”* helps her to confirm that she does not look as boxy as people think. With that phrase, once again, Masters certifies the strength of Carrie’s subjectivity and pride in her physical appearance. However, no matter how confident she is with her attractiveness, she cannot reveal herself publicly: whenever she speaks about this topic it is only *“inside her throat”*- rather a constrained speaking. Moreover, the only person that Carrie wants to challenge her attractive look is her mother-in-law, not any of the villagers, as seen in [LW24b]. It can be explained that on one hand by saying it Carrie wants to prove herself and assert her identity, while on the other hand, she is quite aware of all the social constraints imposed on her as a woman and a widow so she tries to act accordingly. This point is further demonstrated by the fact that Masters only details Carrie’s sexualizing actions in her bedroom only - a very private space.

In short, Masters’ deployment of Transitivity patterns of the extracts of *“The Lang Women”* reveals that Carrie is actively concerned about her physical appearance as one trait of femininity. She is depicted by Masters as a woman who can *“enjoy her body”* when the night comes and who feels proud of it though the local people think she is a little *“boxy”* – this representation can be seen in the great use of Material processes with Carrie as Actor in the extracts. Using Verbal or Mental processes, Masters suggests that Carrie’s confidence and pride in her beauty contributes to boost her self-esteem, subjectivity and her femininity.

The Circumstances of time *“at night”* and place *“before the mirror in the bedroom”* used by Masters in the extracts suggest that Carrie discovers her body in her own place and for herself only. It can be explained that during the day, the hard work on the farm gives her no time for attending to her own physical appearance or posing. Also, we know that Carrie is living in a small and quiet community where ‘fields have eyes and walls have ears’; so that any of her sexually provoking or revealing behaviours may be seen as violating moral principles, particularly in the case of a widow. However, the farm work and social constraints cannot stop her from asserting her female sexuality: she does not do it publicly but in her own sphere – her bedroom. That Masters locates Carrie’s self-gazing activities in her bedroom – a private place demonstrates that Carrie shows concern about conforming to the social expectations of a virtuous young woman by performing those actions in private. The investigation of Masters’ lexical choices then indicates that despite her sexual yearning, Carrie nevertheless behaves virtuously, which defines her virtue as an aspect of femininity.

To conclude, the analysis of Transitivity patterns and the selective word choices in the excerpts of *“The Lang Women”* shows that Masters connects the consideration of female physical features with female desires in her representation of femininity. The

protagonist Carrie is linguistically represented by Masters as a young, romantic and energetic widow. By presenting Carrie as Actor and her body parts as Goal of her own sexualizing actions in many Material processes, Masters demonstrates that Carrie adores her body and spends time exploring it. In the so doing, Masters makes clear that Carrie needs recognition as a young sexual woman, but because of her situation and many social conventions that constrain her, she avoids sexual closeness and she reacts by admiring her body, objectifying herself in order to attract attention and assert presence and agency.

To illustrate Carrie's sexual beauty and female desires, many sexual phrases are used by Masters in the story such as "*rounded limbs*", "*body gleaming golden in lamplight*", "*rose tipped breasts*", and "*her navel small and perfect as shell*" which are interestingly described through the eyes of a man. Masters does not only let Carrie admire her own body but she allows it to be observed and worshipped by the other men, which manifests Masters' positive view of female physical attributes and female desires. Though trying to secretly prove her potential sexuality and being longed for by the male neighbours, Carrie is depicted by Masters as being very determined to control herself and to suppress her sexual desires: she keeps her virtue and conforms to the traditional feminine values of her community.

## Conclusion

The current paper aims to acknowledge that Masters' fiction interrogates and advances ideas about female sexuality that escape the bonds of social conventions and patriarchal oppression. More specifically, by examining her "The Lang Women", the paper has exposed the ways in which Masters linguistically shows that social conventions have converged to create a definition of femininity and female sexuality that in many ways is antithetical to women's reality. This paper has revealed Masters' preoccupation with the ways in which women use their physical appearance and sexual desires to assert agency and to achieve recognition and identity.

Most of these women are sketched in Masters' fiction, including her "The Lang Women", as 'feminine'. By 'feminine' in this paper, the researcher refers to a set of attributes and behavioural qualities associated with the performance of gender roles, and in particular expressing the social belief that members of the female sex ought to exhibit different attributes and behaviours from members of the male sex. Such attributes and behaviours for females, according to Pykett, are usually constructed by a series of polarities such as "the domestic ideal"; or "angel in the house"; "the keeper of the domestic temple"; "commitment to duty"; "self-sacrifice"; and "dependence" (Pykett 1992: 16).

From the analysis of the Transitivity patterns and lexical choices in "The Lang Women" we can see that Masters uses various process types to reveal the personal and emotional aspects of her character's lives and thoughts. We can see the traits of femininity strongly represented by Masters via her main female character: Carrie – a widow with sexual potential who cares about her physical attributes and female sexuality as a way to express femininity, to assert agency and self, and to gain power and recognition. As noted above, Carrie is constructed by Masters as Actors in a very large proportion of the clausal data under investigation, carrying out influences on the Goals/her body. This is one important mechanism through which Masters sets Carrie up as a woman who is concerned with her sexual needs and desires.

Throughout the story, Masters shows positive attitudes towards her protagonist's demonstration of her sexual desires and needs. She linguistically depicts her character as a feminine woman who cares for her physical appearance and female sexuality. Her character Carrie may be found to transgress the unwritten rules of being feminine, that is, refuse to conform to the patriarchal discourse on femininity, and revolt against cultural expectations of what a caring mother and a loyal wife should be. However, Masters does not criticise or deprecate what Carrie has done but expresses sympathy for her. She reveals that it is her right, need, and even their pride (with Carrie) to express their sexual concerns. Carrie experiments with her sexual appeal because she knows that this way she can attract attention and hopes to be loved.

In conclusion, by careful consideration of process types and lexical choices, it is clear that Masters shows a complex representation of female sexuality through the images of the main character Carrie in "The Lang Women". It has also revealed that Masters' story may reject cultural constraints, and move beyond patriarchy to re-imagine futures for women in ways that resist and reject traditional and regressive ideas of femininity and female sexuality.

#### Abbreviation

LW: "The Lang Women." *The Home Girls*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982. 93–106

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#### Authors' contribution

The researcher, Nguyen Thu Hanh, is the sole author of this manuscript.

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