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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Writing about Literature: An Investigation into Students' Consciousness about Gender Roles from their Essays about Literature

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| ABSTRACT

Research on students' essays about Literature has emphasized writing skills and competencies but has yet to focus on investigating students' mindsets. In this research, students' attitudes about gender consciousness were scrutinized using a different approach from the conventional ones: written responses to Literature. The study is grounded in one critical approach to Literature, reader-response criticism, which concentrates on a significant component of a literary work: the reader. This research utilized the short story *Mr. Know-All* by W. Somerset Maugham to explore students' thoughts about gender roles and investigate the means they employed to express their opinions about the given topic. The study used the qualitative method – inductive thematic analysis – to analyze the collected data. Findings reveal students' progressive minds about gender matters, balanced viewpoints about marriage, and keener awareness in choosing the means to express their opinions.

| KEYWORDS

Academic Writing, Writing about Literature, Written responses to Literature, Gender roles, Reader-response criticism, *Mr. Know-All*.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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### 1. Introduction

Writing is one of the four critical skills to measure a learner's language competency in English language learning. It is also a means to communicate and express oneself effectively, through which one can channel their innermost emotions and thoughts to others. Teaching the English language through Literature is a combined approach that allows English learners to improve their language skills and concurrently impart their feelings and attitudes about a certain issue to the reader (Brumfit & Carter, 2000; Carter, 2007; Carter, 2016; Carter & Long, 1997; Chambers & Gregory, 2006; Hall, 2015; Kuze, 2015; Lazar, 1993). Although the engagement of Literature in language teaching and learning has endured controversial arguments from educators and critics (Brumfit & Carter, 2000; Vandrick, 2018), writing about Literature, especially the reader's response to the literary work, has proved to help students have better insights of the work and the world, and improve their critical thinking skills (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Omar & Albakri, 2016; Qamar, 2016; Rahman & Manaf, 2017; Stefanova et al, 2017).

Research on students' essays about Literature for a large part only emphasizes their rhetorical skills in the imaginative literature curriculum (Larson, 1971), the healing function (Fargher, 2012), the ability to enhance students' understanding of the literary text (Marshall, 1987) and sense of justice (McCoy, 2017), communication skills, literary competence, and student autonomy (Neira-Piñeiro, 2014) of writing about Literature. While Larson (1971) confirms that "writing about similarities between events represented in literary works and events experienced in their own lives may clarify for the student [...] both the text and his experiences" (p. 686), few research studies are devoted to exploring the connection between students' beliefs and experiences and the literary work. Therefore, this study was conducted to bridge the gap in the literature.

Gender consciousness was chosen to be examined among the students for two reasons. Gender consciousness supposedly prevails in society today with such worldwide remarkable movements as *#MeToo* and *Women's March*. However, the concrete facts among students have not been mentioned in detail. When it is, the research studies are mostly done by social surveys and interviews (for example, Khalid, 2011; Matsui, 1995; Street et al, 1995), not by analyzing their written opinions. Another reason can be accounted for: in the postmodernist era, one's gender has become more fluid and gender consciousness more liberal; accordingly, learning about students' gender awareness can promote inclusivity and diversity on campus and in society. It can reveal whether traditional gender norms still dominate or if there is a genuine shift towards accepting and celebrating diverse gender expressions. This knowledge can inform campus policies aimed at making the university a safer and more welcoming place for all genders.

The short story *Mr. Know-All*<sup>1</sup> by British author W. Somerset Maugham, published in 1924, risks reinforcing gender stereotypes when Maugham uses irony to critique a female character, emphasizing one important theme: 'Don't judge a book by its cover.' This research study, therefore, employs that story to examine gender consciousness matter among students by a different approach from the conventional ones: through their written responses to Literature.

The study answers two research questions as follows:

- (1) What do students' written responses to Literature reveal about their perceptions of gender roles?
- (2) What are the students' means of delivering their opinions about the given topic?

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Writing about Literature**

Writing essays about Literature is a part of Academic Writing; however, it stands out in Academic Writing in that the writer is expected to have some knowledge of (basic) literary terms and theory, and a thorough understanding of the literary work they are writing about, in addition to their writing mechanics. The fact that writing about Literature straddles Language Skills and Literary Studies is not to perplex English learners but to enable them to fully develop their language skills, critical thinking, and personal dimensions through Literature.

Various researchers have discussed and reviewed important aspects of essays about Literature. Kahn et al (1984) emphasize that writing about Literature is a combined task that has to do with skill acquisition, skills of literary analysis, and skills of argumentation (p. 8). Purves (1968) emphasizes four critical elements of writing about Literature: the elements of engagement-involvement, the elements of perception, the elements of interpretation, and the elements of evaluation. These elements, from their perspective, are closely related to the aspect of personal experiences. Larson (1971) names this type of writing "rhetorical writing" because its purposes are to "induce belief, inspire action, or evoke feelings, or reinforce conviction" (p. 680). According to him, the rhetorical characteristics of the literature essay include interpretation, identification of stylistic features, comparison and developmental study, and evaluation. Larson also confirms that "writing about literature... teaches all that the student needs to know about rhetorical writing, and gives students many other desirable experiences in writing" (p. 687). Based on the framework of Purves (1968), Morris (1976) refined and extended his framework, proving that Purves' framework includes the elements of criticism. Because it entails a greater number of skills and knowledge than it does in a conventional essay, Vandrick (2018) asserts that "this variation of the standard essay [writing about literature] is a difficult genre for many students, but allows them to explore an idea in depth" (p. 5), which will prepare them for the literary course at university. As can be seen, scholars so far have converged at three critical points: (1) writing about literature can be a challenging task for students since it is, to some

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<sup>1</sup> The story features an intrusive character who was despised and ridiculed by people on a voyage from San Francisco (the United States) to Yokohama (Japan) after World War II, Mr. Know-All. His real name was Max Kelada, whose identity was doubtfully British because his appearance was very much Eastern. The I-character, an English gentleman, shared the cabin with Mr. Kelada and secretly expressed his scornful look on him as his behaviour showed no observance of British etiquettes. Because Mr. Kelada always showed off his knowledge about various matters and insisted on winning in any arguments, he was detested by almost everyone on board, especially Mr. Ramsay, a short-tempered American working for the American Consular Service stationed at Kobe. He was on board with his wife, Mrs. Ramsay, a lady of harmonious elegance and modest attitude, whom he had left alone at home in one year because of his work. When Mr. Kelada saw a pearl chain worn by Mrs. Ramsay, he confidently claimed it was genuine pearls. Bragging himself a pearl expert, he evaluated its price around \$15,000 to \$30,000. However, it turned out that Mr. Ramsay had bought the chain for his wife with his meager salary, a fake one costing only \$18. They made a bet about the genuineness of the chain in which whoever won would earn \$100. Scrutinizing the pearls more closely, Mr. Kelada was about to claim his triumph when he happened to see that Mrs. Ramsay's face turned white with fear. He suddenly understood the truth and accepted to lose the bet to save Mrs. Ramsay's face. After that event, he was mocked and ridiculed even harder by people on board because they were content that he was finally taught a lesson. The next day, in his cabin, the I-character witnessed an envelope secretly sent to Mr. Kelada. Opening it, Mr. Kelada found a \$100 note as compensation, meaning that his evaluation of the value of the pearl chain was right, and possibly Mrs. Ramsay's secret lover when she was left alone in New York had gifted it to her.

extent, incorporated with Literary Studies; (2) it is connected to personal mindset, belief, and experiences; and (3) it prepares students for better and stronger skills in the real world, including “analysis, interpretation, and explanation” (Kahn et al, p. 2).

## **2.2. Reader-response critical approach**

The reader-response criticism focuses on the reader, the third component in the triangle “the author – the work – the reader.” In other words, the reader is empowered to contribute to the interpretation process of the literary work. This is a revolutionary approach in literary criticism since criticism used to be regarded as the job of only the elitist, of the capable hand, not common readers. With the reader's participation, the critic's power and position, to some extent, are challenged in a most threatening way. The throne is no longer theirs; they are decentered and even made a commoner, though knowledgeable, among other commoners.

In their reading act, readers can discover more about their own identity, the literary work, and the world around them as well. Iser (1976), a well-known figure in reader-response criticism, explains that this is possible because its roots are planted in phenomenology, a branch of philosophy that emphasizes the being of human beings, which is universal (Bunnin & Yu, 2004; Habib, 2005). One's reflection of the world is an intentional act that transforms her/his perception, making their inner world visible, and thus the world one perceives is rather the world one understands than the world as it is. Because it has to do with their being, phenomenology is also related to existentialism, another philosophical discipline. With all regards, reader-response criticism is the living proof of the essence of one's thoughts, mindset, ideology, culture, belief, and experiences that make up their uniqueness and identity.

Besides highlighting the reader's active role in her transactional theory of reading, Rosenblatt (1978, 1995), another key figure in this criticism, contradicts two types of reading, efferent reading and aesthetic reading. The former refers to the information that is carried away after the reader finishes their reading journey, while the latter revolves around the reader's experiences and emotions that are evoked during said journey. The theory of interpretive community by Stanley Fish, a highly influential American literary theorist and legal scholar, also underscores the importance of shared cultural and social contexts that influence one's interpretation of the text. With the reader's power, this relationship becomes more complex than ever, inviting a multitude of readers with their various experiences and insights to take part in imparting the meaning of the work, and consequently, of the world. It, no doubt, abolishes elitism. Not only challenging the critic, this critical approach to Literature also shakes the realm of creation because the reading process significantly resembles the author's text-creating process. It is, more precisely, the reader's re-creating process.

Because reader-response emphasizes the reader's role, it is usually employed in English and EFL/ESL classrooms to strengthen students' confidence and stimulate their autonomy in learning the English language. Marshall (1987) successfully proves the effect of writing about Literature on students' understanding of the literary text, especially the role of personal analytical writing. The findings indicate that both personal and formal analytical writing yield equal effectiveness in enhancing students' perceptions and insights of the literary text, with the former even affirming personal identity and nurturing creativity among students. Ali (1994), incorporating the reader-response approach into teaching an advanced English reading class in Malaysia, finds that this approach creates a more enthusiastic and non-threatening learning environment for students. Qamar (2016) emphasizes that the reader-response approach in English Literary Study can strengthen students' critical thinking skills because the interaction between the reader and the text enables one to refine their communication and thinking abilities. McCoy (2017) does not directly mention the reader-response theory in the study; however, while highlighting the role of open-ended guided questions in enhancing students' sense of justice in the Writing about Literature classroom, the researcher incorporates questions related to students' personal experiences to train students. Pham (2020) suggests that English teaching and learning (EFL/ESL) in light of reader-response criticism can foster an inclusive classroom. All in all, researchers interested in Literature have seen eye to eye with each other about the substantial role of the reader-response approach either in Literary Studies or EFL/ESL classrooms. It is, therefore, a promising and applicable approach in education.

## **2.3 Gender roles**

### **2.3.1 Gender vs. Sex – Gender roles, gender stereotypes, and sexism**

Any discussions about gender and gender roles should begin with the distinction between sex and gender, as sociologists have asserted the demarcation between them. Sex is a biological construct that “determines one's biological destiny” (Wienclaw, 2012, p. 78); meanwhile, gender reflects social and cultural purview, according to which gender roles are enabled. Sex/gender distinction was made because sociologists would like to argue against the exaggeration of physical and mental make-up, which was to maintain patriarchy. In doing so, sociologists wished to trigger women's consciousness about their own worth in every aspect of life, not just restricted to domestic roles (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2006, p. 56). Gender roles have been assigned as a consequence of social and cultural perceptions of sex, which can easily cause gender stereotypes where women and men are attributed specific sets of behavior and attitudes. Both sexes can suffer from these stereotypes, but throughout human history,

much more agony is believed to afflict the female sex. Women, for example, are homemakers whose duties include taking care of and raising the family, and more importantly, are subservient to their fathers and husbands in all respects. Meanwhile, men are breadwinners of the family, thus endowed with more power over women.

Gender roles and gender stereotypes can spontaneously lead to sexism, to which women are subject to falling victim. Sexism refers to "the attitude holding that one's own sex is superior to the other and leading in practice to limited respect for the rights, needs, and values of the other sex" (Bunnin & Yu, 2004, p. 639). In this case, it is the female sex that is relegated. Gender roles, gender stereotypes, and sexism have such a serious impact on society that they have become the mindset, even the subconsciousness, of people from various cultures who frequently perceive them unquestioningly as a truism. With the efforts of the feminist movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, women have been liberated from the cage of prejudice and bias that had imprisoned them, enabling their voices to be heard and their opinions appreciated. The fact that many women today are successful in both domestic and social spheres has nonetheless reinforced their aptitude; also, it has proved that a person, be it a woman or a man, should not be taken for granted according to their gender.

### **2.3.2 Perception of roles among Vietnamese people**

The philosophy of Confucianism has influenced Vietnamese people's minds about gender roles in the family and society since the feudalistic period in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when it was introduced to and permeated Vietnam. This doctrine defines a person's self in harmonious relation to other people's selves, where each one performs their definite and prescriptive roles. One of the five human relations dictated in this philosophy is between husband and wife, besides the other four relations: parent and child, minister and ruler, older and younger brother, and friend and friend (Herr, 2003). There are clear distinctions between the husband and the wife in terms of the responsibilities they bear and how they are expected to treat each other in the family. As such, the husband is the decision-maker, and the wife must submit to her husband in every aspect, whether inside or outside the family sphere. In other words, a woman plays a supporting role to her husband, and her realm is inside the family, in contrast to the husband's dominant role and the onstage sphere (Simelton, Duong, & Houzer, 2021). This ideology, rooted in Chinese feudalism, is believed to have maintained order in Vietnamese society and family.

Those who abide by this doctrine may find little discomfort and trouble, but arguments have been made to counter Confucianism. A body of literature claims that this ideology "has played a central role in subjugating women under one of the most systemic and prolonged patriarchies in human history" (Herr, 2003, p. 471), thus undoubtedly lessening women's significance and decreasing their mobility in modern society (Simelton, Duong, & Houzer, 2021). As a consequence of inequality, this belief has denied girls and women the right to education and marginalized them into domestic duties and activities (Nghe, Mahalik, & Lowe, 2003). With such a view of men's and women's roles, many Vietnamese families have passed down to the next generations their biased teachings of gender roles, exacerbating gender discrimination, especially in some provincial areas in Vietnam.

Many research studies about the perception of gender roles in the Vietnamese context have been conducted with diverse purposes and participants, but the literature has witnessed a lack of focus on university students with a view to transforming the curriculum and pedagogy in higher education. The most abundant research found in the literature has to do with studying Vietnamese women/men/adolescents (for example, Abrams et al., 2016; Dang, 2021; Nghe et al., 2003; Robbins, 2007; Rosenthal, 1996). For university students, research did not pay particular attention to the shift in their perception but focused more on exploring other aspects, such as their sexual behavior (for example, Bui et al., 2010).

### **2.3.3 Gender roles/stereotypes in the short story *Mr. Know-All* by W. Somerset Maugham**

In *Mr. Know-All*, the element of Irony is employed to highlight one major theme of the story, which can be explained by the proverb 'Don't judge the book by its cover.' With the use of Irony, Maugham points out to readers that Mrs. Ramsay, elegant and modest as she appears, is unfaithful and disloyal to her husband. It is implied that she has an affair with a secret man while his husband is away on duty. Mrs. Ramsay's appealing and modest demeanor can cheat people about her virtue, even the I-character, a thoughtful and sophisticated British gentleman. The image of the pearl is embedded in the use of Irony to make an impression on the reader that the true nature of something or someone can be hard to see through; sometimes, it is even disguised and hidden under layers of refined behavior or exquisite appearance. The irony in this story not only entertains readers but, more importantly, aims to criticize Mrs. Ramsay in particular and those who deliberately and skillfully conceal their nature with motives in general.

This viewpoint can be prone to gender stereotyping when Maugham conveys his message through the situation of a female character. On reading the story, readers would undoubtedly be critical of Mrs. Ramsay; on the other hand, Mr. Know-All, or Mr. Max Kelada, a male character detested by people at first, is eventually attributed with wisdom and sophistication at the end of the story, the fact of which also helps to interpret the theme Maugham reinforces: appearance can be misleading. Even though

other male characters in the story are negatively delineated to some extent (Mr. Ramsay, for instance), the critical point Maugham makes about Mrs. Ramsay is the most scornful, mocking, and insulting. The reader, unaware of the embedded stereotype, does not question the seemingly matter-of-fact proposition in the story. Nonetheless, this paper is not to criticize Maugham for the bias and sexism he embeds in the story. Our point in proposing the case is to examine how students respond to gender stereotypes.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The students under investigation in this research study were the sophomores of the Faculty of English at a University well-known for its education in social sciences and humanities in the South of Vietnam. The researcher chose the convenience sampling technique to recruit students for the written assignments and interviews because they were easily accessible to the researcher. There were 62 students, including 20 males and 42 females, ranging from 19-21 years old. All started to learn the 12-week course *Introduction to Literature* in charge by the researcher in the previous semester. Before taking this course, all of them had finished the English language skills courses intended for English majors, equivalent to the C1 level.

The participants were informed that one of their homework assignments would be used as the data for the researcher's study on student writing about Literature. If any students wished to withdraw, they could do so without discrimination. The 6 participants for the interview were volunteers; they joined the interviews by replying to the email sent to them after the course was finished. Because the interview was conducted after the course had been completed, it was trickier for the researcher to recruit volunteers for the interview: they became elusive and reluctant to join. However, only in this way could the research ensure that the interviews were not influenced by the interviewees' wish to improve their scores in class.

The course *Introduction to Literature* was designed for sophomore students in the second semester, alongside the introductory courses to other disciplines such as Linguistics and Translation, to provide them with fundamental knowledge of different majors offered by the Faculty, and also prepare them for the choice of the major they were supposed to make in the semester to come. Regardless of the major they opted for in the next semester, every student in the same cohort had to take all the introductory courses.

#### 3.2 Research method and tools

The study employed the qualitative method, namely, inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two research tools, students' written assignments and semi-structured interviews, were utilized to elicit the needed data.

Textual analysis is used to analyze the participants' written responses. This method, emphasizing close reading, allows for a more thorough and deeper grasp of the participants' writing. As for the semi-structured interviews, the participants were invited to share their deeper opinions about the findings the researcher had come up with after the textual analysis. After the analyses of the written responses and the interviews, thematic analysis was used to identify and finalize the emerging themes from the data.

All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese via the Zoom platform, a widely used and familiar videoconferencing tool in Vietnam. Besides, the platform's recording function and user-friendly interface enhanced the interview process. Employing the participants' native language facilitated their self-expression. The collected interview data provided the necessary information to address both research questions and concurrently confirmed the findings elicited from research question 1.

#### 3.3 Data collection

The data collection process comprises two stages: the collection of written data, which was done as a homework assignment in the classroom, and oral data (the interviews), which took place after the completion of the course.

The story *Mr. Know-All* was taught in two weeks, week two and week three, as an illustration of analyzing short fiction, to help students understand the key concepts of the elements of fiction (plot, characterization, setting, theme...). The literary text was delivered to the students in the first week of the course, so they could have one week to read it beforehand. The lessons in weeks two and three acted as a sample analysis of a short story, according to which students would be able to prepare for their own analysis and reflection of the other short stories of the course in the weeks to come. After week three, i.e., when the short story *Mr. Know-All* was done, the students were required to write a reflection based on three guided questions. They were required to explain and elaborate their responses into paragraphs, not an essay. A word limit was not given as this was believed to enable freer and unhindered self-expression. The reflection was assigned as homework, and the students were to submit their answers the following week. The three guided questions are as follows:

1. Do you think Mrs. Ramsay [the supposed adulterer] is justifiable? Explain.
2. How do you rate women's responsibility in maintaining their family's happiness?
3. Should a woman give up on her marriage when it has been a burden for her to pursue a new future for her life? Why (not)?

The students' responses were not marked and scored, but only to serve the study purpose. This had been clarified to the students before the assignment deadline so that they would not be worried or nervous about their responses. After the students completed the course, an invitation to the interview was sent to them. It was to ensure impartiality and to prevent possible fear from the students that their decline to the interview could influence their final scores.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The coding process was done according to Braun & Clarke (2006). All the responses from the students' written assignments and interviews were coded, and the codes were subsequently categorized into subthemes and themes. The researcher read the students' responses at least three times. The first time was for an overall understanding of the students' answers. For the second time, the researcher identified the codes and possible subthemes/themes of the reflections and categorized them accordingly. The third and several other times were for the researcher to read and reread, to make supplements if needed, and to choose typical quotes from the responses for the data analysis.

The researcher also recruited one colleague from the same Faculty as a second coder. Before the analysis, the researcher trained the second coder about how the coding process should be implemented. The allowed disparity between the researcher and coder was 90%.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### **4.1 Progressive conception of gender roles and gender equality**

The first findings drawn from the responses indicated that the participants were aware of women's rights, gender roles, and gender equality. Most students believed the responsibility to maintain family happiness no longer rests solely on women's shoulders but should be a shared duty among family members regardless of gender. Also, regarding the issue of divorce, which is always a stigma for women in many cultures, especially Eastern ones, the participants boldly claimed that a woman has the right to give up on her marriage when it is no longer a refuge for her, so that she can walk on her new life path. To them, women "should be in control of their destiny" (M1), and marriage is not the only priority for women but only one priority among many others (F1). As long as the divorce is done in a "civic manner" (M9), women's choices should be respected (F3, F5, F6, F8, F23, F26, F27, F30, F32...). When it comes to female adultery like the one in the story, women must not be the ones to take all the blame. They questioned the husband's accountability and behavior as well, which could be the cause of his wife's extramarital relationship. The responses indicated that the students had a more balanced viewpoint as to who got the blame in a divorcing relationship and were more open-minded toward divorce for a woman. While Vietnam is still influenced by Confucianism (Vu & Yamada, 2024), which dictates women's inferior role and inclination to prejudice in society, this finding, to some extent, proves that young people today have shifted their perspectives and mindsets about the said issue.

Half of the papers expressed their disapproval of female adultery, which proves that the virtues commonly associated with women, such as resourcefulness, loyalty, and devotion, were still honored. The interviews with the students clarified this point, in which they stated that today, those virtues are not supposed to belong to women only, but are deemed to be the qualities of both genders, regardless of their roles in society. The student encoded I1 asserted that there should not be any framework to define a woman; they can become whoever they want. By an unconventional approach in studying the issue, this finding is still aligned with several research studies about gender consciousness among students (for example, Constantinou et al, 2009; Prosen, 2022; Rashid & ElSalhy, 2022; Tal et al, 2024). Therefore, the study helps reinforce the general picture among students not only in the world but also in Vietnam.

### **4.2 Balanced viewpoints about marriage**

In such a complicated matter as marriage and extramarital relationships, the students took a more distant position to ensure a fairer and more balanced look, rather than focusing only on blaming the woman. Their responses showed signs of caution, considering thoroughly their opinions, and trying to be as convincing as possible. Some of them were even more objective when they pointed out the kind of relationship the couple in the story had, a distant one, which may make it hard to maintain. Others regarded the social expectations (the story setting is the 19<sup>th</sup> century), which possibly hindered women from choosing their partners and voicing their opinions in the marital relationship. A few written responses even refused to judge the case, pointing out that the female character was but a minor one in the story; thus, they did not have enough clues about her married life as well as her personality traits. It proved that the students would rather not assert their opinions than be unreasonably judgmental.

Some students went to great lengths to explain why they did not assert an answer but straddled between both yes and no to female adultery. The male student's writing encoded M12 wrote:

On the one hand, Mrs. Ramsay may be unjustifiable because of her infidelity, deception... On the other hand, this character could be justifiable... It's possible Mrs. Ramsay felt neglected, unhappy, or trapped, leading to *her seek*<sup>2</sup> affection elsewhere... Mrs. Ramsay might not have felt she had the option of divorce or open communication about her dissatisfaction within the marriage...

This finding is strengthened by the interview with the students. One student, encoded I5, pointed out that readers are not the insiders in the story but listeners who were told the story from the narrator's perspective; therefore, it should not be fair to judge anyone in the story. Moreover, there must have been some causes at a certain time that triggered the characters to behave in such a way. If this story does not provide adequate clues to explain the incident, it is not the reader's right to judge. This mindset and thinking might provide some hints about their approach to tackling real troubles and dilemmas in life, enabling them to be more alert to sensitive and tricky situations.

For the argumentative issue in society, divorce, they were even more cautious when most of them responded that opting for a divorce to end a marriage depends on many pivotal issues, including not only the couple but also their children, families, and the whole society. All the participants seemed conscious that divorce is a complicated issue, and the couple involved has to handle it with great care. While suggesting women's self-love, they still advocated for considerate decisions. The student F14 wrote:

... If continuing the marriage makes the woman tired and face serious mental problems, even physical problems, she should end her marriage to concentrate on herself and learn more about her value. On the other hand, if the woman just wants to spend all her time improving her abilities and assumes her marriage is a burden, then ending the marriage is not *the*<sup>3</sup> right *thing*<sup>4</sup>...

Besides, some responses suggested solutions rather than a divorce: communication with the partner (M11, M14, F7, F11, F31, F39), and therapy (M9, F14, F22). They assumed one root cause of family conflicts to be miscommunication; therefore, the couple should talk it over with their partner before proceeding with a divorce. The students' writings showed their consideration of various aspects of the matter before making a specific answer to the topic questions. Once they made a choice, they did so with a sensible and thoughtful explanation.

Many research studies have proved the powerful role of writing about Literature in enhancing students' critical thinking skills, and the findings they have come up with are so far supporting each other. It can be said that this type of writing is an effective way to equip students with important skills in thinking (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; McCoy, 2017; Omar & Albakri, 2016; Richardson, 2004; Vandrick, 2018), enabling them to sail faster in higher education.

#### 4.3 Means of opinion delivery

It was found that the students' writing assignments were written with more complex structures than simple ones. Table 1 shows that the complex structures used in the essays (including complex sentences, compound-complex sentences, complex-complex sentences, and simple sentences with complexity) account for the greatest number, 689 sentences, of all the 1,093 sentences in the written assignments (not including 8 outliers whose answer 1 did not address the issue being asked, and 1 outlier whose assignment was detected plagiarized). According to the writing assessment scales for the C1 level by Cambridge English, an essay considered meeting the requirements of this level must display "a wide range of simple and complex grammatical forms with full control, flexibility and sophistication" (Cambridge English, n.d.). Similarly, the descriptors of the writing task 2 of IELTS, bands 7-9, also emphasize "a wide range / a variety of complex structures" with accuracy and flexibility depending on the specific band (IELTS, n.d.). Besides, those assessment scales highlight that errors must be rare or non-systematic, and do not impede communication. In the student essays in this research, the students wrote 81 incorrect sentences, less than 8% of the total number of written sentences, a rather humble amount. Although it can be argued that the assignments looked good because it was homework, and the students had more time to polish their writing, this finding still suggests that the writing task about Literature is one of the means to encourage students to write more academically, to refine their composition, generally boosting overall writing quality in students.

<sup>2</sup> Grammar error

<sup>3</sup> Grammar error

<sup>4</sup> Lexical error

*Table 1. Number of sentences with various structures in the assignments (not including 9 outliers)*

<b>Types of sentence structures</b>	<b>Number / Percentage</b>
Simple structures	257 / ~ 25.4
Compound structures	66 / ~ 6.5
Simple sentences with complexity (for example, inversion, reduced clause, multiple subjects and verbs...)	126 / ~12.5
Complex/Compound-complex/Complex-complex structures	563 / ~55.6
<b>Total number of correct sentences</b>	<b>1,012 / 100</b>

*Table 2. Number of correct and incorrect sentences in the assignments (not including 9 outliers)*

<b>Correct/Incorrect sentences</b>	<b>Number / Percentage</b>
Correct sentences	1,012 / ~ 92.6
Incorrect sentences	81 / ~ 7.4
<b>Total number of sentences</b>	<b>1,093 (100)</b>

In the interview, the students were asked if they had been aware of using the formal style during their writing. Most of them said yes to the question, confirming that apart from generating ideas for the topic questions, they were heedful of how their ideas should be delivered. Even though grammar errors were found (81 incorrect sentence structures), it did not hinder the fact that the students were conscious of writing formally in an academic context. That has increased the professionalism of their written answers and, to a greater or lesser extent, made their arguments more convincing.

This finding strengthens research studies that have emphasized the function of writing about Literature in honing students' writing skills in general (for example, Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Langer, 2001; Smagorinsky, 2002). It proves that students could participate more actively in the writing process and become more aware of their choice in writing style, making their essays sound more professional.

The last finding from the data includes the rhetorical means the students use to discuss the given topic, which is their use of metaphors. There was a tendency among the students to use metaphors to describe relationships, especially marriage. However, it can be observed that the metaphors they used were mostly conventional, not expressing their imaginative power. Table 3 displays the metaphors found in their written responses.

*Table 3. Metaphors about marriage used by students*

<b>Metaphors about marriage used in students' written responses</b>	<b>Times of use</b>
A burden (this metaphor was suggested in guided question 1)	30
Leave/Stay in/Get out of a marriage <sup>5</sup>	18
End/Depart from/Terminate a marriage <sup>6</sup>	15
Cast aside/Get rid of a marriage <sup>7</sup>	2
A broken marriage <sup>8</sup>	2
A cage/a prison/a chain	3
A rough path	1
Suffocating people with its claws	1
A trampoline for people to leap to their adventures or a cushion for people to fall back on	1
Marriage is a source of happiness / motivation / encouragement / limitation / hindrance	6
<b>Total times of using metaphors</b>	<b>79</b>

It can be seen from the table that the students repeated the suggested metaphor in guided question 1 the most, taking up more than one-third of the number of times metaphors were used. Other metaphors were simply conventional and quite commonly used in everyday life (Marriage is a place/a journey/a thing). Only one or two metaphors can be considered more novel, such as "marriage suffocates people with its claws" by student encoded M3, and "marriage should be a trampoline for people to leap to

<sup>5</sup> Conceptual metaphor: Marriage is a place.

<sup>6</sup> Conceptual metaphor: Marriage is a journey.

<sup>7</sup> Conceptual metaphor: Marriage is a thing.

<sup>8</sup> Conceptual metaphor: Marriage is a breakable thing.

their adventures or a cushion for people to fall back on" by student M11. Their writings, as a result, almost instantly became more vivid with rich images. As metaphor points to the relationship between what is known and what is unknown, in which the latter is defined by the former (Kövecses & Benczes, 2010), the finding reveals that with their use of common metaphors, the students have not been able to free their imagination, still staying in a well-trodden path of thinking. It is understandable, however, as this is not a creative writing course.

Uninteresting as the finding may sound, the interviews with the students exposed some remarkable insights into their use of metaphor. Student encoded I3 revealed that she used metaphor because it seemed the most convenient way for people to understand her ideas and opinions. More interestingly, student I5 reported her use of metaphor as a result of her effort to make the issue as objective as possible for the reader. In other words, she did not want to point out the matter explicitly but would rather use an indirect way, metaphors, for readers to think and make their own judgment. Boyd (2012) argues that writing metaphors can increase productivity and enhance the writing experience. As such, it is highly recommended that students be encouraged to employ more creative metaphors in their writing process, especially in writing about Literature, to improve their overall writing quality. Because not much research is devoted to this topic, it could serve as future research for the researcher.

## 5. Conclusion

Writing about Literature through the case of written responses to a short story has revealed intriguing factors about the students involved in the study: their progressive mind about gender role and marriage, and improved means of opinion delivery. The findings also implicitly indicate that most students are not hesitant to confront and challenge the notion of gender bias and sexism. This important awareness among students demands a novel approach to learning and teaching, not only in terms of gender-related matters, but also in other significant issues such as self-identity, classroom management, and methodology, to ensure fair educational conditions for all.

The study is not without its limitations. First, the data can be made richer by having the students respond to more stories, including novels, which will supposedly provide more data for the researcher. Second, students should be required to write complete essays to answer given topics, not only short paragraphs for the guided questions. Doing this will enable more space to explore students' idea-arrangement skills and other possible writing qualities, as well as a more insightful look into their mindset. Third, more participants should be involved in the writing assignments and the interview to ensure greater reliability of the findings. This study, in fact, can serve as the preliminary stage of exploring students' strategies in writing about Literature.

The study also suggests that empirical research should be done in the future to reinforce the themes identified in this study, and further study about students' use of metaphors in writing could be implemented.

## List of abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

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