

## Research Article

# BLACK HUMOUR AND SUBVERSIVE SATIRE: FEMINIST STYLISTICS IN THE ESSAY *I WANT A WIFE*

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### ABSTRACT

Feminist writers use language as an essential part of the struggle for liberation, employing linguistic features to project women's subordination under patriarchy. A feminist stylistic approach can be used to make our appreciation of language of these writers more subtle and our discussion of stylistics more complete. Judy Syfers's essay *I Want a Wife*, reveals the unfair practice of patriarchy. This paper is an attempt to investigate stylistic features in this essay from a discourse analysis perspective and provide a possible interpretation that these features can open to. It finds seven foregrounding textual features that the writer uses to satirize patriarchy while simultaneously producing sardonically humourous effects: 1) use of the pronoun 'I' in association with a collective identity in the self-introduction, 2) a shift into a phallologocentric point of view, 3) clausal repetition, 4) words with positive connotations, 5) wordplay, 6) modality, and 7) taboo breaking humour. The operation of these linguistic features constitutes in itself not only a hint of the worldview of the patriarchal structure in which Syfers lived but also an attack on the dominant masculine ideology.

**Keywords:** Feminist Stylistics, Judy (Syfers) Brady, Black Humour, Subversive Satire

## Introduction

There is a saying by Mark Twain that: “Humour is mankind’s great blessing.” So, people love to hear funny stories and laugh hard. According to social studies, humour is a social phenomenon which is reflected in playful interaction and mirthful communication, for sense of humour is a characteristic of a person and reflects his/her readiness for understanding as well as producing cognitive processes by smiling and laughing (Svebak, 2014).

However, some humourous stories are not simply to produce mirth and laughter but they can leave readers and audiences wondering whether they should laugh or cry. This kind of literary work is often known as ‘black humour’ or in French ‘humor noir.’ This term was coined by Breton in 1935. The term ‘black humour’ refers to humour that deals with unpleasant aspects of life in a bitter or ironic way (Smith, 2017).

Gender roles is one of the serious subjects that people often make fun of. In the past, women were often perceived as the inferior butt of jokes. Walker (1988a, p. 63) points out that in the early years of the women’s movement, women — especially feminists — were often accused of having no sense of humour. Walker explains that women stopped laughing at

jokes that denigrated them, and they did not appreciate cultural assumptions about women’s intelligence, competence, and proper roles in jokes which present women as helpmates, sex objects, and domestic servants. As Walker contends, the male author writes from within the dominant discourse in that he adheres to male supremacy. This position of privilege allows white male humourists to change what they find wrong under patriarchy for their own purposes. For Walker, a joke depends on the teller and the told, and if something is not funny, it does not mean the person listening has no sense of humour. Hence, the study of humour is significant when situated in a social context.

Language is considered an essential tool that feminist writers use to break with patriarchal systems of thought. However, these women authors can only use language that is available to them. Several writers contend that women have limited means to express themselves. Kristeva writes “there is no other space from which we can speak; if we are able to speak at all, it will have to be within the framework of symbolic language” (Moi, 2002, p. 169). Foucault argues that what is ‘true’ depends on who controls discourse; if we accept this argument, then it

is apparent that women have been trapped inside the male truth (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 1997, p. 128). Cixous believed that human experience and thought were wholly constituted through language (Rich, 2014). In the same way, Derrida says that 'there is no outside of the text' by which he meant there is no truth or reality outside of what is created by and through language (Rich, 2014). In relevance to this point, Irigaray advises women to play with mimesis or to resubmit themselves to the ideas about women elaborated in/by a masculine logic, without letting themselves be simply reduced to it; and she points out that a possible operation of the feminine language is not to apply a feminine linguistic practice, but rather the revelation of its repression by an effect of playful rehearsal (Jacobus, 1982, pp. 40-41). Women's comedy can be regarded as 'a playful rehearsal' in Irigaray's sense.

Several feminist writers maintain that women's comedy can be read as an act of subversion. Barreca (2013) writes that women's comedic writing is escapism, for it is a means to transform their anger and frustration into action; humour, nevertheless, is viewed as an act of aggression, even for women. For Barreca, feminine comedy does not attack the powerless; rather, it makes

fun of the powerful whilst the audience will appreciate comedy not as a way of taking things lightly, nor even as a way of taking things seriously, but as a way of seeing things as they are. Also, Walker (1998b, p. 9) points out that to be a woman and a humorist is to confront and subvert the very power that keeps women powerless. In relevance to this, female laughter—especially when collective—gives women who tell jokes a sense of empowerment and self-affirmation, whilst potentially threatening the patriarchal order (Gamble, 2000, p. 207).

A literary text can be dealt with and discussed within stylistics. According to Verdonk (2002, p. 40), a stylistic analysis might contribute to a clarification and further interpretation of readers' understanding. Verdonk (2002, p. 6) contends that in a stylistic analysis, we pay attention to linguistic elements that stand out in the text, rather than every form and structure in it. These outstanding features rouse the readers' interest or emotions. This psychological effect is called 'foregrounding.' It might include a distinct patterning or parallelism such as typography, sound, word choice, grammar, or sentence structure, as well as deviation from linguistic rules. For Verdonk, the concept of style profoundly involves choice, which assumes that

different choices will produce different styles, and thereby different effects. In the same light, literary works, according to the theories of Russian Formalism, are special because they foreground their own linguistic status, therefore drawing attention to how they say something rather than to what they say (Baldick, 2008, p. 223).

Feminist stylistics is a sub-branch of stylistics. It aims at providing readers with analytic and critical tools to identify how gender issues materialize linguistically as well as to resist gender bias in texts. The term ‘feminist stylistics’ as originally defined by Mills (1995, p. 1) is “concerned not only to describe sexism in a text, but also to analyze the way that point of view, agency, metaphor, or transitivity are unexpectedly closely related to matters of gender, to discover whether women’s writing practices can be described, and so on.” Mills and Mullany (2011, pp. 2-3) contend that research on linguistic feminism has a specific political purpose by focusing on gender as a social, political, and ideological category, and suggest that “a focus on language has to be a focus on gender inequality in general.” In the same direction, Montoro (2014. pp. 347-348) maintains that feminist stylistics deals with how linguistic features such as grammatical

and/ or lexical aspects, supra-sentential, discourse devices and others encode gender issues, and she points out that whereas non-feminist studies on language and gender usually highlight differences of language use as employed by men and women, feminist linguistics characterizes political and ideological aspects that might not be the major concern of the former.

The essay *I Want a Wife*, written by Judy (Syfers) Brady, exemplifies women’s comedic writing. This essay first appeared in *New York Magazine*, December 20-27, 1971. It was written as a speech for a rally in San Francisco and later became a timeless 70’s feminist manifesto (Anonymous, 2017). Noted for its sense of humour, this essay satirizes patriarchal cultures and makes fun of absurd values that keep females at a disadvantage. By the effect of recounting in a playful manner, this essay can be considered as an exemplar of a revelation of patriarchy and women’s subordination.

Recent criticism about this essay deals with its content and social impact. For example, an article from UK Essays (2018) focuses on some elements relating to this essay such as audience, purpose, ethos, pathos, and logos. Bernard (2020) writes an overview of this essay in her article titled “*Why I Want a Wife*”: *The Overwhelmed*

*Working Mom Who Pined for a Wife 50 Years Ago.* In it, Bernard tells us about Syfers's life and relates that to what Syfers writes in her essay. In the same direction, Napikoski (2019) writes an article called *Judy Brady's Legendary Feminist Satire, "I Want a Wife,"* in which she lists a wife's duties and points out the social significance of this essay. However, none of the previous works has discussed its form or stylistics in detail and in relation to underlying meaning.

### Objective

Rather than identifying the frequency of the occurrence of linguistic features and analyzing the text as a transparent window on reality as in previous papers on this essay, this paper discusses the author's stylistic features in *I Want a Wife* and provides a possible interpretation regarding what these textual features tacitly imply in the hope that this analysis will shed light on a hidden and unspoken but important idea.

### Methods

The researcher analyzed the essay *I Want a Wife* by employing the concept of stylistics and feminist theories as the analytical framework. The study concentrated primarily on foregrounding

linguistic features of this essay and the feelings and responses that these linguistic features would create for audiences.

The procedures of the study are described as follows: It started with a close reading of the literary text to find out its foregrounding linguistic features and their possible interpretive significance. Then the researcher reviewed feminist theories as along with the linguistic features and their pragmatic and purposeful functions. Afterwards, the researcher tried to relate the foregrounding linguistic features with feminist ideas. If the researcher's initial interpretation from the close reading was not supported by these salient linguistic features, or if the linguistic features were of no interpretive significance as presumed in the close reading, the researcher would revise her analysis. Once the researcher settled on a set of foregrounding linguistic features whose pragmatic and purposeful functions relate to feminist ideas, the next steps were to discuss them in detail by identifying and naming these distinguishing features, documenting their functions, and constructing a meaningful interpretation.

### Findings and Discussion

Reflecting a feminist theme, the essay *I Want a Wife* relies on several

literary techniques to satirize patriarchy and to produce sardonically humorous effects. In particular, it utilizes seven foregrounding textual features : 1) use of the pronoun 'I' in association with a collective identity in the self-introduction, 2) a shift into a phallogocentric point of view, 3) clausal repetition, 4) words with positive connotations, 5) wordplay, 6) modality, and 7) taboo breaking humour. The operation of these linguistic features not only hint at the worldview of the patriarchal structure in which the speaker lived but also playfully overturn that structure.

### *1. Pronoun 'I' in Association with a Collective Identity in the Self-Introduction*

The use of first-person pronoun 'I' in association with a collective identity in the self-introduction suggests the emphases on the speaker's personal qualities and the sense of sisterhood. The author writes:

[1] I belong to that classification of people known as wives.

As for the emphasis on the speaker's personal qualities, the use of the pronoun 'I' allows the speaker to speak from her perspective. Baker (2014) contends that a human person is an entity that is embodied essentially and has a first-person perspective, and a person exists only

when she has her first-person perspective. In the same respect, according to Bramley (2001, p. 27), the pronoun 'I' conveys the speaker's opinion, makes the speech more subjective, and shows the speaker's authority. Thus, this practice, which is used in the essay *I Want a Wife*, implies that the speaker is thinking a certain thought and has something to tell the audience.

As for the emphasis on the sense of sisterhood, this form of writing involves expressing her solidarity with other women in the patriarchal society. Her self-introduction, which embraces her identification with the collective identity, gives a sense of sisterhood. According to Morgan (1970), the notion of sisterhood conveys the implicit assumption that all women have certain areas of experience in common on which a sense of identification can be founded. In relation to this point, according to Whooley (2007), collective identity refers to the shared definition of a group that derives from its members' common interests, experiences, and solidarities; and the salience of any given collective identity has an impact on social movement. That is to say, the author of this essay may imply that she herself is a member of the group of women and she speaks in the name of sisterhood, by

expressing her solidarity with her female audiences or readers on the assumption of shared sisterhood.

In brief, the pronoun 'I' in association with a collective identity in the self-introduction allows the speaker to divulge her personal qualities as well as to provoke a sense of sisterhood among her female readers.

## ***2. A Shift into Phallogocentric Point of View***

Some feminists theorize that women are constructed socially and linguistically by a symbolic order that recognizes the predomination of the phallus. Cixous (2000) points out that traditional writing is always phallocentric. Feminist criticism has used the term 'phallogocentrism' to theorize that phallocentric discourse is monolithic. According to Gamble (2000, p. 294), 'phallologocentrism' is a combination of the terms 'phallocentrism' (focusing on the masculine point of view) and 'logocentrism' (focusing on language in assigning meaning to the world). The term 'phallogocentrism' is understood as a representation of a form of double-bind to the female subject, who is constituted linguistically and socially by a male lexicon that makes masculinity the measure of normality. This term is used

to critique patriarchal authority and self-legitimizing systems of thought that define themselves in relation to an authoritative center. Nonetheless, attempts have been made by feminist writers to undo the ideas about women elaborated in and by the phallogocentric discourse. One of them is to reveal the dominant culture or order prescribed by the patriarchy. As mentioned previously, Irigaray (cited in Jacobus, 1982, pp. 40-41) points out that a possible operation of the feminine in language becomes a revelation of its repression, resulting from an effect of playful rehearsal.

In the essay *I Want a Wife*, the author, after the self-introduction, seems humorously playful about the idea of wanting a wife. She reveals the context from which she gets the idea by referring to a male friend who represents the social structure, and then poses a rhetorical question to her audiences whose general perceptions of women's duties she would want to elicit.

[2] Not too long ago, a male friend of mine appeared on the scene fresh from a recent divorce. He had one child, who is, of course, with his ex-wife. He is looking for another wife. As I thought about him while I was ironing one evening, it suddenly occurred to me that I too, would

like to have a wife. Why do I want a wife? This can be viewed as a shift into a phallogocentric point of view in that the speaker adopts the pose and attitudes attributed to men. This position is advantageous to the speaker. For instance, it allows the speaker to speak through a voice of a male persona and to reveal this flawed character who represents men in the patriarchal culture to the audience. If something goes wrong, this female speaker is not the one on whom to put blame, for she speaks in the name of a dominant and hegemonic discourse. That is to say, the speaker can simultaneously take risks and escape punishment for her boldness. Moreover, this point of view can be a complacent cover under which the speaker deconstructs the phallogocentric order. Walker (1998b, p. 98) advises us to look in women's writings for a subversive edge under an apparently complacent cover. In relevance to this, Kernan (1962, p. 154) says that the satirist usually claims to be conservative, to be using his/her verbal art to shore up the foundations of the established order. Furthermore, this writing practice creates aesthetic distance which enables the audience to differentiate between the real speaker and the imaginary entity, or the male persona

in the world of the story whose mind is revealed as the first-person narrator. This practice would help audiences appreciate the work aesthetically and prevent them from being confused with reality. Thus, her story henceforth appropriates the attitudes and perspectives of a male persona without necessarily relinquishing the 'sisterhood' status previously denominated by the use of the first-person 'I.' It should be noted that the term 'persona,' in literary works, refers to the identity or fictional 'I' assumed by a writer (Baldick, 2008, p. 370).

In sum, the shift into a phallogocentric point of view brings this female author some advantages. It allows her to write in disguise of a male persona who represents the phallogocentric scheme while she can maintain her stance in relation to the sisterhood. Also, this writing feature is employed to subtly subvert the patriarchal ideology as well as to determine an aesthetic distance.

### 3. *Clausal Repetition*

Through the phallogocentric point of view, the author does not use any synonymy or anaphoric pronouns regardless of singular or plural forms to refer to 'a wife' or 'wives,' although information about gender and number is available. Instead, the speaker employs repetition. Halliday and

Hasan (2013) point out that repetition is a cohesive device which links new utterances to previous ones using repeated words, phrases, and sentences. The speaker of this essay uses the clause *I want a wife* 29 times. Hence, this salient linguistic feature would sound unfamiliar to most audiences. Some examples are as below:

[3] *I want a wife* who will not bother me with rambling complaints about a wife's duties. But *I want a wife* who will listen to me when I feel the need to explain a rather difficult point I have come across in my course of studies. And *I want a wife* who will type my papers for me when I have written them.

[4] *I want a wife* who will take care of the details of my social life. When my wife and I are invited out by my friends, *I want a wife* who will take care of the babysitting arrangements. When I meet people at school that I like and want to entertain, *I want a wife* who will have the house clean [...].

Obviously, the clausal repetition 'I want a wife' not only serves as a cohesive agent but also develops a writing style and reinforces the theme of this essay. Jasim and Aziz (2007, p. 5) point out that repetition in political discourse can be employed to achieve emphasis

or rhythm for idea development and /or to implicate a particular emotional state. In the same vein, Short and Leech (2007) say that repetition is expressive in that it gives emphasis or emotive highlighting to the repeated meaning. Also, repetition, as Hoey (1991, p. 65) stipulates, can enforce an association of one idea with another or create a frame for combining the association of several ideas. In this essay, the author's employment of clausal repetition creates a frame for the male persona's motives for seeking out a wife to take advantage of in every possible way.

In short, in addition to serving as a cohesive device, the clausal repetition "I want a wife" is a method used to achieve rhythm and emphasis, strengthen the male persona's traits, develop important ideas of the essay, and influence the audience's feelings. That is, the repetition of the clause 'I want a wife' is employed to convince the audience of women's subordination to men.

#### **4. Words with Positive Connotations**

The author uses words with positive connotations to create the image of ideal women under patriarchy. It is worth mentioning that connotation is a range of further associations that a word or phrase suggests in addition to

its straightforward dictionary meaning, and a word's connotations can usually trigger emotional responses commonly associated with its referent. However, a word's connotations are affected by the context in which it is used (Baldick 2008, p. 68). In this essay, the author uses positive connotations reflecting attributes of a wife. This word choice resonates with the image of good women under patriarchy. Some examples are:

[5] I want a wife who will *take care of* my physical needs.

[6] I want a wife who will *keep my house clean*.

[7] I want a wife who *cooks the meals*, a wife who is *a good cook*.

[8] I want a wife who will *care for me* when I am sick and *sympathize* with my pain and loss of time from school.

[9] I want a wife who will remain sexually *faithful* to me.

The author reveals a wife's virtues associated with patriarchal femininity and domesticity, using these italicized words, which connote positive meanings. This corresponds to the stereotyped ideal woman who, according to Gamble (2000, p. 189, & p. 323), is described as nurturant wife, mother, or muse and compared to 'the angel in the house.'

However, words carrying positive connotations when they are associated with the male persona can carry hidden meaning. This implies that the male persona is compared to a child — an incapable being who entirely depends on wives, financially (example 10), physically (examples 11-13), and psychologically (example 14).

[10] I want a wife who will *work and send me to school*.

[11] I want a wife to keep track of the children's doctor and dentist appointments . And *to keep track of mine* too.

[12] A wife who will pick up after my children, a wife who will *pick up after me* .

[13] I want a wife to go along when our family takes a vacation so that someone can continue to *care for me* and my children [...].

[14] But I want a wife who will *listen to me* when I feel the need to explain a rather difficult point I have come across in my course of studies.

Recognizably, the author uses words that describe a mother's duties to describe a man's demands. These connotations given to the italicized words in this context can be seen to forge

a comparison between grown men and children.

The incongruity about gender roles can produce a humorous effect. The incongruity humour theory states that humour is created out of conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in a joke (Ross, 1998). In the same vein, Schopenhauer (trans. 2016) contends that the cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation. In this essay, the incongruity is that while women are to perform according to social norms regarding gender, the male persona deviates from these social norms. Traditional definitions of masculinity include certain qualities such as independence, pride, resiliency, self-control, and physical strength (Thompson, 1987, p.155). And men are not permitted to fail at anything they try because failure in any domain implies failure in one's manhood (Tyson, 1999. p. 86). That is to say, the application of two different sets of principles for this situation can produce a humorous effect.

To recapitulate, the use of words with positive connotations when used with words referring to children and the male persona exert different effects. These words

when associated with the former create the image of the wife as the angel of the house. However, this lexicon when associated with the latter derides a failed masculinity of the male persona. Thus, this incongruity serves to produce a subversive satire.

### 5. *Wordplay*

In this essay, wordplay is employed to satirize gender inequality. It should be noted that a common definition of wordplay is an activity which "involves making jokes by using the meaning of words in an amusing or clever way" (Collins. n.d.). In this essay, outstanding wordplay is found in the use of the phrases 'A Wife' versus 'a wife,' i.e., the capitalized and lowercase forms of these words. This use of different orthography is meaningful. The author writes in her self-introduction as shown in example [15].

[15] I am *A Wife*.

Regarding orthography, there are a few patterns of the usage of capital letters; one of them is for the first letters of the main words of the titles of people. The use of the capital letter 'W' for 'Wife' in this essay assigns status to the classification by raising it to the level of a title. Besides, the capitalized indefinite article 'A' reinforces the title and extends it to name all such persons who fit the

category. The capital 'A' might further suggest a slight pun. Since 'A' is also the highest mark given to students for their excellent performance at school, its use here might subtly trigger readers to associate 'A' or 'A Wife' with 'Excellence.'

In view of feminism, the use of uppercase of the phrase 'A Wife' possibly suggests a representation of the ideal woman in patriarchal society. Friedan (1963), who created the phrase 'feminine mystique,' analyzed the profound but unnamable dissatisfactions felt by American housewives. She identified that the highest value and the only commitment for women was the fulfilment of their own femininity, which revolved around their housework, marriage, sexual lives, and children, and this femininity is mysterious and intuitive.

Then the author of this essay writes 'a wife' with lowercase followed by phrases stating her duties 41 times across an essay which consists of 1,017 words. Examples [3]-[14] are cases in point. The indefinite articles 'a' or 'an' are used as determiners to refer to someone or something for the first time or when people may not know which particular person or thing you are talking about. Throughout this essay, the author uses the phrase 'a wife,' instead of the definite article 'the'

to refer to the very wife who has just been mentioned. Hence, this suggests that a wife is defined as one of a man's helpmates, one easy to find, or one serving the demands of patriarchy.

What highlights an incongruity is the fact that the speaker performs perfect wifely duties, but the male persona, representing males under patriarchy, feels inclined to pursue more wives to do such wifely jobs. This writing device builds toward the idea of extramarital affairs or the freedom and entitlement to change one wife for another, which the male persona explicitly states at the end of the essay as shown in example [16].

[16] And I want a wife who understands that my sexual needs may entail more than strict adherence to monogamy.

In short, to criticize the unfair practice, the speaker uses wordplay which is based on the varied uses of the phrases 'A Wife' versus 'a wife.' This can be interpreted to mean that women's values depend on how valuable they are to men. And women themselves are not different from objects which can be acquired and owned by men.

## 6. *Modality*

An analysis of modality in this

essay reveals a system of gender inequality. According to Verdonk (2002, p. 39), modality signals attitude and enables a speaker to express degrees of commitment to the truth or validity of what they are talking about. Verdonk (2002, p. 49) contends that modal auxiliaries usually represent characters' consciousness in free indirect discourse because these forms express a personal attitude towards a particular event or situation. Some examples of modal auxiliaries are *may*, *could*, *would*; and sentence adverbs include *perhaps* and *certainly*. In this essay, the foregrounding modal auxiliaries are *will*, *must*, and *would*.

The modal auxiliary 'will' is found in almost every sentence in this essay. One of the main uses of the modal auxiliary 'will' is to refer to things in the future that we think are certain (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In this essay, this modal auxiliary is often preceded by the phrase 'I want a wife who.' Some examples are:

[17] I want a wife who *will* plan the menus, do the necessary grocery shopping, prepare the meals, serve them pleasantly, [...].

[18] And I want a wife who *will* type my papers for me when I have written them.

[19] I want a wife who *will* have

arranged that the children are fed and ready for bed before my guests arrive [...].

These examples suggest that women are conditioned to conform to their society's expectations which revolve around wifely duties for the sake of the existence of men.

The modal auxiliary 'must' is also used. It is worth mentioning that this auxiliary is used to express that something is very likely, probable, or certain to be true (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In this essay, this auxiliary comes after the subject 'I,' which refers to the male persona, and is followed by a statement suggesting the patriarchal power to enjoy the privilege:

[20] I *must*, after all, be able to relate to people as fully as possible.

This means that men in patriarchal society are granted with the privilege to relate to other women and it is likely that they will exercise it to the fullest. This writing practice obviously ridicules social norms and cultural values.

In the last line of this essay, the modal auxiliary 'would' is used in a rhetorical question to invite the readers to think about this unfair situation. It also presupposes the presence of the audience in the context of the story. The author writes:

[21] My God, who *wouldn't* want a wife?

The modality 'would' used as an auxiliary verb shows that something might be likely or meant to happen under certain conditions (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In this essay, the use of the modality 'would' in a negative interrogative sentence allows the speaker to elicit audience response or invite them to share the narrator's point of view, which is the fact that there doesn't appear to be any reason for any man not to want a wife. In other words, this line calls patriarchal structures into question.

In a nutshell, whereas the modal auxiliary 'will' precedes statements regarding wifely duties, the modal auxiliary 'must' is employed as an antecedent to a statement concerning the male persona's claim for the privilege. And the modal auxiliary 'would' when coupled in a negative interrogative in example [21] helps complete the essay's satire of patriarchal society.

### 7. Taboo Breaking Humour

Typically, people avoid discussing taboo topics. A taboo against women openly discussing sexual problems or sexuality is upheld in most societies. In the same vein, sex is the most common taboo area for humour (Alice, 1998, 2005). In relation to

this point, some feminists contend that this taboo subject is predominantly a male preserve. Montemurro, Bartasavich, and Wintermute (2015) maintain that sex talk is masculinized, and they point out that women feel uncomfortable discussing such topics and are afraid of being criticized for communicating their sexual desires or behaviors. In this essay, the author subtly introduces this taboo topic along with the notion of extramarital affairs.

[22] I want a wife who is sensitive to my sexual needs, a wife who makes love passionately and eagerly when I feel like it, a wife who makes sure that I am satisfied. And, of course, I want a wife who will not demand sexual attention when I am not in the mood for it. [...] And I want a wife who understands that my sexual needs may entail more than strict adherence to monogamy. I must, after all, be able to relate to people as fully as possible.

Although this joke features hegemonic masculinity, it is different from mainstream humourous stories told by men in some ways. For instance, this sexual humour reinforces the images of woman corresponding to male pornographic fantasy. In it, the wife is presented as a good patriarchal woman who performs appropriately in bed. This presentation is

unlike those in numerous male-dominated collections of wit and humour in which most stereotypes about women are negative. Bing (2007) contends that in mainstream jokes, presumably told from a male perspective, women exist only as standard stereotypes such as dumb blondes, nagging wives, Jewish mothers, and angry mothers-in-law.

Moreover, male privilege is satirized through this sexual humour. It is worth reiterating that although the speaker adopts a voice of a male persona, she establishes her stance on sisterhood as stated in the self-introduction. Occupying this position, the speaker is allowed to mock a patriarchal practice. In this light, this joke should be read as criticism of the position of those who possess a penis, for it implies that patriarchy connotes status. Mitchell (1977) observes that a joke that is primarily derogatory to men tends to be appreciated by men when it is told by a man to other men, but it is likely to be less funny to men when it is told to them by a woman. Bing (2007, p. 349) observes that men's jokes often refer to the size of sexual organs. The male sexual organ, as some feminist scholars theorize, associates with the privileges granted for them by the social norms. Thompson (2001, p. 38) writes: "the penis serves the ideological function

of symbolizing 'human' status [...] women must be constantly used by it to prove that men exist; that the sum total of a man is his penis." Tyson (1999, p. 28) maintains that Freud's concept of 'penis envy' should be read as 'power envy,' for it is power and all that seems to go with this sexual organ that little girls envy. In this light, the joke in this essay, which is told by a woman from her stance in relation to sisterhood, might provoke female audiences to bitterness or resentment and seem not to be funny to men. In other words, this taboo breaking humour addresses the issue of sexism rather than sex. Therefore, this joke can be regarded as an instance of black humour.

To be brief, the author's use of humour differs from what is typically found in mainstream jokes. On one hand this sexual humour presents the image of a woman who performs according to patriarchal expectations regarding gender but on the other hand it satirizes patriarchal conventions. Told by a woman from the standpoint embracing sisterhood, this joke can make the audience aware of gender inequalities and direct especially women toward the realization that the patriarchal scheme allows men to enjoy freedom even at women's expense.

## Conclusion

Instead of explicitly recounting women's suffering, Judy (Syfers) Brady, the author of the essay *I Want a Wife*, uses specific stylistics to draw satirical humour in relation to and at the expense of patriarchal ideology. This paper finds seven foregrounding features: 1) use of the pronoun 'I' in association with a collective identity in the self-introduction, 2) a shift into a phallologocentric point of view, 3) clausal repetition, 4) words with positive connotations, 5) wordplay, 6) modality, and 7) taboo breaking humour. The operation

of these linguistic features contributes to a clarification of the general position of powerlessness attributed to women, makes social reality visible to its audience, and constitutes in itself an attack on the dominant masculine ideology. Moreover, the interpretation of this playful rehearsal can serve as a critique of its own absurdity. In other words, this essay deconstructs male discourse. After all, the essay *I Want a Wife* does not really mean that the female author wants a wife, but she wants society to realize that wives or women are full human beings too.

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