A Particular Housekeeper: A Linguistic Analysis of the Representation of a Housewife Within Olga Masters’ The Little Chest

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Abstract
This paper investigates the representation of femininity through the image of a devoted housekeeper in Olga Masters’ short story The Little Chest. Employing the framework of Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics, the paper examines Masters’ attitudes towards traditional feminine roles of Australian women during the 1930s. Particularly, it concentrates on depicting Mrs Schaefer in The Little Chest as a hardworking woman who seems to become obsessed with housework. The paper also tries to answer the question whether she truly has passion for keeping the house clean or she is doing it as a way to hide her loneliness and lack of emotional fulfillment.

Since the interest of the present study lies in identifying strategies used to represent femininity by Masters, the study will investigate the representation of femininity through domestic activities in order to discover what linguistic choices were employed by Masters to depict this feature and to determine if this depiction is colored by or represents a point of view towards it. The paper also supports Masters’ suggestion that doing housework is a way for women to claim their social position, agency and prove themselves.

Key words: Olga Masters; Housewife; Domesticity; Femininity; Transitivity

INTRODUCTION
This paper is an account of one of major themes in the writing of Olga Masters, using a discourse analytical method based on systemic functional linguistics. I aim to show that by using linguistic analysis we can see how femininity and domestic activities are represented in Masters’ short story The Little Chest.

The themes and subjects of Masters’ fiction are various, but often they engage with issues of women’s domesticity: the daily effect of feminine roles in women’s familial and social life, and the claims of household tasks as a potential message to empower through experience and knowledge and to gain agency and self-representation. Reading Masters’ fiction reveals a central preoccupation with the varied ways in which domestic activities can function as a force that controls and inhibits individuals, but can also empower them.

In this paper, I am considering Masters’ representations of female domesticity in The Little Chest not simply to strengthen a political point on women’s equality, but because I feel that the themes of femininity and domesticity are important in Masters’ work. One effect of this point suggests to me that Masters employs female domesticity as a means of making her character portrayals more intensely personal. The descriptions of female domesticity in Masters’ works certainly go beyond the traditional conception that domestic tasks are just the trivial works women must do in everyday life. She writes about aspects of female domesticity in a manner which implies that domesticity is a means of gaining agency and identity in human interrelations.

As aforementioned, the study will include the extracts from Masters’ short story The Little Chest with its thematic focus on household management as a feature of femininity. In other words, it illustrates the idea of woman as a particular housekeeper.
1. OLGA MASTERS: A WOMAN WRITER ON WOMEN’S TOPICS

Brought up and educated in an Australian country town, Olga Masters was over 50 years old when her short stories began to appear. She was a very warm and loving woman, wife, and mother of seven children (Coleman, 1990). And her writing epitomizes the traditional female stereotype of the mother-wife figures suppressing personal life choices. It tells stories of rural Australian women from various walks of life struggling against environmental, social and personal injustice.

Masters herself notes that the themes of rural Australian life, parent-child relationships, and women’s roles are all issues that will keep turning up in her work because they are an inevitable part of their life. Interestingly, Masters does not simply assign domesticity to women per se but traces links and connections between their roles and their fulfillments. In his article Olga Masters’ Celebrations, Matthews (1988) asserts that in Masters’ fiction, the ordinary external routines and developing inner states of a central female character are evoked through massive accumulation of lovingly and accurately rendered details such as the ingredients of a meal, the arrangement of furniture in a room, the texture of fabrics, the unspectacular requirements of daily work.

Most of the women are sketched in Masters’ fiction as being feminine, spending their time at home doing housework, attending to the children, preparing delicious meals for the whole family. Their place is in the home, the perfect environment in which to undertake responsibility for the spiritual and physical development of children. In the other words, Masters’ female characters are often caught and imprisoned by the ‘homes’ they belong to: their marriages, their husbands, their children, their property, their insecurity. They move from one set of patriarchal structures to another: from the male dominance of family men to the male dominance of the society. Gilbert (1988, p. 174) comments on the fates of Masters’ women that they can be controlled and disciplined by men and “they can be played with, teased, tormented, and bullied...”. One typical example of Masters’ feminine model is Mrs Schaefer who “was a very particular housekeeper, sweeping and scrubbing and shining her house, washing curtains when they showed the slightest sign of soiling, and she was fanatical about cleaning windows” (Masters, 1985c, p. 29).

2. THEORY ON TRANSITIVITY

The theoretical framework of Transitivity was established and developed by Michael A. K. Halliday. Transitivity generally refers to how meaning is represented in clauses; Transitivity patterns can reveal the certain worldview “framed by the authorial ideology” in a literary text (Fowler, 1996, p. 138). Clauses represent events and processes of various kinds, and Transitivity aims to make clear how the action is performed, by whom and on what. Transitivity is an important and powerful semantic concept in Halliday. It is part of the ideational function of language, therefore, an essential tool in the analysis of representation. Implicitly, different social structures and values require different patterns of transitivity.

Hasan (1985, p. 63) claims that Transitivity “… is concerned with a coding of the goings on: who does what in relation to whom/what, where, when, how, and why. Thus the analysis is in terms of some process, its participants, and the circumstances pertinent to the process—participant configuration”.

In other words, 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.

Material processes of transitivity are processes of doing, usually physical and tangible actions. They express the fact that something or someone undertakes some action or some entity ‘does’ something—which may be done to some other entity. Two essential participants usually appear in Material process are the Actor—the doer of the process and the Goal—person or entity effected by the process. Mental processes usually encode meanings of mental reactions such as perception, thoughts and feelings. Mental processes give an insight into people’s consciousness and how they sense the experience of the reality. Mental process has two participants: the Senser—the conscious being who is involved in a Mental process and the Phenomenon—which is felt, thought, or seen by the conscious senser. Relational processes construe the relationships of being and having between two participants. Identifying Relational processes serve the purpose of defining and the participants involved are Token and Value. Attributive Relational processes serve to describe with the participants of Carrier and Attribute.

There are also three subsidiary process types that share the characteristic features of each of the three main processes. Between Material and Mental processes lie Behavioural processes that characterize the outer expression of inner working and reflect physiological and psychological behaviors such as breathing, laughing, sneezing… Behavioural processes usually have one participant who is typically a conscious one, called the Behave. Between Mental and Relational processes are Verbal processes, which represent the art of saying and its synonyms. Usually three participants are involved in Verbal processes: the Sayer is responsible for Verbal process; the Receiver is the person at whom the Verbal process is directed; and the Verbiage is the nominalized statement of the Verbal process. And between Relational and Material
processes are Existential processes which prove states of being, existing, and happening. Existential processes typically employ the verb be or its synonyms such as exist, arise, occur. The only participant in this process is Existent which follows the there is/are sequences.

In fact, Transitivity consists of more complex categories but for the purpose of this paper I am giving only this very brief summary of the framework. Here are the examples taken from the story The Little Chest to illustrate the theory of Transitivity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>She removed the three long drawers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>She had insisted on the tool's going with the furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Mrs Schaefer thought carefully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>... who gossiped about Mrs Schaefer’s domestic habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Mrs Schaefer was a very particular housekeeper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential</td>
<td>There’s a titter from the tennis shed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As aforementioned, the study will include the extracts from the story The Little Chest with its thematic concentration on household management as a feature of femininity. I would like to focus on ‘keeping the house—woman as a particular housekeeper’. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that through the daily activities, Mrs Schaefer, the protagonist of The Little Chest discovers her selfhood and thus constructs her personality and identity in the end.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The current paper will employ the methods and the suggested set of linguistic tools adapted from Michael A. K. Halliday and his associates’ theory on Transitivity to find out how female domesticity during the 1930s is depicted in Masters’ The Little Chest.

To begin with, the extracts taken from the story are broken into clauses and a detailed analysis is undertaken to identify the choices employed by Masters in depicting the main character Mrs Schaefer, her activities and circumstances. For reasons relative to the scope of this study, only clauses related to the main character Mrs Schaefer and her activities were analyzed. The procedure I carried out when analyzing the data can be described as follows.

Firstly, I had a close reading of the story to get the main message conveyed by the author. Then I implemented an intuitive analysis of the presence of femininity: I gathered the extracts from Masters’ story The Little Chest in which the traits of femininity were, in my view, present. The selected extracts were then examined with a discourse analysis approach. In Language and Power, Fairclough (2001, p. 21) suggests a procedure of three steps for discourse analysis as description of text, interpretation of the relationship between text and interaction, and explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context. Making the same point, Wood and Kroger (2000, p. 95) suggest the analysis should ‘explain what is being done in the discourse and how this is accomplished, that is how the discourse is structured or organized to perform various functions and achieve various effects or consequences’.

The description stage first involves the division of each extract into clause complexes. The clause complexes were then divided into clauses by grouping each process with whatever is associated with it experientially (i.e. participants—who did what to whom, and circumstances—where, when, how, why etc.). The identification of verbal groups that function as the processes for the analysis of ideational metafunction was labeled. I then attempted to identify the boundaries between the different stages and phases within these clauses. On the basis of this, I was able to make a provisional analysis, with Transitivity patterns. The process types in each clause were identified, labeled and the different processes associated with each of the main participants were calculated. I looked into the process types, focusing on the process choices between Material action, Mental processing, the expression of Relational connection, and of Behavioural and Verbal processes. Then I considered which entity/entities is/are presented as participants in a text’s representation of events. Before I examined the tendency of entity/entities to be agentive or affected, we should consider which entities are inscribed as the main participants to avoid overlooking the hidden participants.

I found the creation of a participant-verbal process table which tracks the introduction and presence of participants and processes in the text very helpful as a way of refining the clausal boundaries and of analyzing the ways in which Masters structured and organized her writing. After that, I should give attention to circumstantial elements in the clause of the texts. Circumstances can extenuate or incriminate and they often have more to do with underlying causes. In the case of a context, a number of surrounding circumstances might impose an impact on our evaluation towards the characters’ actions and personalities. For example, the circumstances in Masters’ The Little Chest often refer to house spheres such as kitchen, parlor, and hall, which strengthen the judgment that Mrs Schaefer is a devoted housewife. In short, during the analysis, I
tried to answer the questions on the types of processes representing the events, the roles of participants involved, the types of circumstances included in the representation and the mark of agency.

Then, the main results of this 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. These quantitative and qualitative patterns then serve as an investigation on how language is used by Masters to portray the femininity and female domesticity.

4. OVERVIEW OF THE STORY

The Little Chest was published in the short story collection A Long Time Dying by Olga Masters in 1985. The main character Mrs Schaefer has a passion for a piece of furniture—a little chest that is owned by the family. She has been depicted as a maternal and family-oriented woman. Considered as “a center piece for the whole house”, the chest draws a lot of attention, energy, and hard work from Mrs Schaefer. The story also offers much evidence to illustrate that Mrs Schaefer is constructed as “a particular housekeeper” with an obsessive interest in keeping the house and the furniture especially the little chest “scrupulously clean”.

In the story, Masters suggests that Mrs Schaefer’s responsibility is to make sure that the household is tidy and clean, and that the cupboard is meticulously organized. To some extent, Mrs Schaefer devotes so much time and effort to keeping the house “spotlessly clean” that she seems to neglect the other tasks: she does not have time for social gathering or communicating with other people; she even forgets to bring any “tucker” to the tennis match where her husband is playing with friends so he mocks her publicly, criticizing that she is more likely to bring “soap” and “turpentine”. “She was [usually] left at home with the children”, cleaning the house while her husband has the leisure of doing what he pleases. There appears inadequate interaction, sharing or empathy from her husband for what she is doing. The question whether Mrs Schaefer spends a lot of time doing housework and keeping the house clean because she really enjoys doing it or because she is hiding the unhappiness of her marriage is still left controversial.

The preponderance of the Material processes involving Mrs Schaefer indicates that the text is significantly dominated by activities and events with a variety of action verbs such as: “sweeping”, “scrubbing”, “shining”, “washing”, and “cleaning”. It is evident that the transitivity system is strategically deployed by the author in this story to create a sense of physical action. In this ‘world of action’ Mrs Schaefer is generally portrayed by Masters as a principal doer or an Actor. Consider the following examples, from the 25th clause complex (LC25) and the 34th clause complex (LC34) in The Little Chest:

LC25 Mrs Schaefer was a very particular housekeeper, sweeping and scrubbing and shining her house, washing curtains when they showed the slightest sign of soiling, and she was fanatical about cleaning windows.

LC34 She took everything out and removed the three long drawers and two smaller ones at the top, and polished each individually, with particular attention to the wooden knobs, using a cloth stretched between her hands to give them such a lustre, they were eight little lamps gleaming in the dark shadows at the end of the hall.

The transitivity representation of Mrs Schaefer as an Actor in the examples shows that she puts much passion and effort into keeping the house clean and well-organized. Halliday defines Material processes as “processes of doing” which express both concrete and abstract activities (1994, p. 106). Material processes are further categorized into those that are transitive and those that are intransitive, where the former involves two participants and the latter just the Actor and no other participant. Thus, by the very fact that more than one entity is involved, an Actor in a transitive process is
‘doing’ something that will have an effect on the other participants. Sharing the same point, Andrew Goatly defines Actors in transitive Material processes as the most powerful kind of participants because they exercise their effect/influence on other social participants and objects apparently and often volitionally (p. 288). It is noted here that most of the clauses involving Mrs Schaefer are transitive ones. These occurrences are Goal-directed clauses, where the process makes a direct impact on the Goal. In the above examples Mrs Schaefer dominates as an agent of transitive actions, i.e. she is cast in the role of a doer or an Actor, where she experiences her influences on household objects as Goals. This demonstrates an increase in the level of explicit linguistic agency in the character of Mrs Schaefer.

To focus on answering the question of the relationship between Mrs Schaefer and her surroundings, a further analysis of the texts involving Mrs Schaefer’s participation as Actor is given in Table 3 below. (Note that in Table 3, 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).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Relationships between Mrs Schaefer as an Actor and Household Items as Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clauses</strong></td>
<td><strong>Household items affected by Mrs Schaefer’s actions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC11b</td>
<td>&quot;she was moving the chest&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC25b</td>
<td>&quot;she was sweeping her house&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC25c</td>
<td>&quot;she was scrubbing her house&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC25d</td>
<td>&quot;she was shining her house&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC25e</td>
<td>&quot;she was washing curtains&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC27b</td>
<td>&quot;she could reach the highest windows&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC32b</td>
<td>&quot;she would often, on a Saturday afternoon, fill a large dish with hot soap water&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC32c</td>
<td>&quot;she would wash every piece of good china and glass&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC34a</td>
<td>&quot;She took everything out&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC34c</td>
<td>&quot;she removed the three long drawers&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC34d</td>
<td>&quot;she polished each individually&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In these occurrences, Mrs Schaefer is depicted as an Actor in many transitive Material processes, e.g. “sweeping”, “scrubbing”, “shining”, “washing”, “filling”, “removing”, and “polishing”. Her actions are entirely transitive Material processes with the Goals. In these examples, the Goals are all house-related objects such as “the windows”, “the curtain”, “the chest”, “the china and glass” and “the drawers”. Hence, she has an effect on the house and furniture. By so doing, she is fulfilling the domestic duties prescribed for her and maintaining the wellbeing of her family.

One interesting point is that Masters’ usage of these Material clauses only depicts the relationship between Mrs Schaefer and the house itself or furniture in the house, not any connections between her and the other people including her husband or her neighbors/friends, which shows that Mrs Schaefer seems to relate better to things than to people generally, not just her husband. One can see that most of the time, she is confined to the kitchen or the living room, on her own, cleaning and organizing things. As a family-oriented woman, she may find happiness in doing things such as washing dishes, preparing meals, cleaning the house. The tidiness and orderly status of the house may bring her joy and satisfaction and may bring joy to other family members. However, this may also suggest that Mrs Schaefer’s devotion to and consideration for the house is the result of a not very good relationship with her husband. Throughout the story, we cannot see any association or sharing between them, or appreciation by her husband for her actions. Perhaps a lack of social interactions and social significance in the life of Mrs Schaefer could be one reason for her isolation.

While Mrs Schaefer is grammatically represented by the author mainly as an Actor doing housework, her husband Sandy is realized as an Actor in the activities that have nothing to do with household chores. Rather, he is seen enjoying himself, playing tennis, for example. Consider the following examples:

LC20b "Sandy was picking his teeth after dinner;"
LC31a "He helped organize the football;"
LC31c "and he went fishing and shooting;"
LC42a "Sandy was playing at the end of the court near the wire gate;"

In addition to this, the first time Sandy is fully introduced is when they discuss whether to keep a carpenter’s tool when they move house. Mrs Schaefer “insisted on the tool’s going with the furniture” to help her with cleaning tasks while Sandy “wanted it tossed in with the rubbish”. These examples indicate the difference in their attitude towards household chores: Mrs Schaefer keeps thinking about the tool while Mr Schaefer (Sandy) just wants to get rid of it. Through the characterization of Mrs Schaefer and her husband in the roles of Actors in these extracts, Masters emphasizes the industriousness and sense of responsibility of Mrs Schaefer as a housekeeper, contrasted with her husband’s indifference.

Apart from showing Mrs Schaefer in the role of
an Actor, the data shows that the predominant way of representing her is in terms of activation. The processes of activation predominate and reach a total of 29 while the processes of passivation only constitute one of the means of representing the participant. In his discussion of role 
demonstration, Theo van Leeuwen makes the distinction between social actors who are activated or “represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity” (p. 43), and those who are passivized or “represented as undergoing the activity … as being at the receiving end of it” (p. 44). In the text under analysis, Mrs Schaefer is linguistically depicted as activated in activities and rarely passivized. Activation is used to present Mrs Schaefer as the “active doer of the action”. Moreover, activation puts more direct emphasis on the Goal which is the furniture in the house. For example in the sentences [LC25], [LC34], [LC38], it is shown that it is Mrs Schaefer, no-one else, who affects or ‘does something to’ her house. Thus, readers keep their focus on Mrs Schaefer and her acts.

LC25 Mrs Schaefer… “was sweeping, scrubbing and shining her house

LC34 She took everything out and removed the three long drawers and two smaller ones at the top, and polished each individually, with particular attention to the wooden knobs, using a cloth stretched between her hands to give them such a lustre...

LC38 She kept a fairly frugal table at home and avoided as far as possible contributing to the fare for afternoon tea at the tennis.

Using this pattern of energetic activities, Masters indicates that Mrs Schaefer’s passion for cleaning the house becomes so strong that she seems to overdo it and then her family life becomes unbalanced. This can be seen in particular in several instances using passive construction. A prominent example is “Mrs Schaefer was left at home with the children” [LC32a]. In this example, Mrs Schaefer becomes a passive participant, and it may even be the case that the author’s use of the expression ‘being left at home’ signals something negative in Mrs Schaefer’s self-image. But another possible interpretation would be that Masters is implying a negative evaluation of Mr Schaefer because he goes out to have fun and leaves his wife at home.

Thus although Mrs Schaefer is mostly presented by Masters as an Actor involved in material processes, Masters casts doubt on either Mrs Schaefer’s willingness to act on anything beyond the household objects, or the positive nature of that situation: she is passivized or forced into action by being “left at home” with her children while her husband is enjoying his hobbies. We know that Mrs Schaefer is doing what a good housewife is supposed to do—she spends an enormous amount of time on the household chores. However, she actually overdoes it and even by the end of the day she is still so obsessed by it that other people, including her husband, think it is a little bit odd. He does not respect what Mrs Schaefer is doing but criticizes her for spending too much time on cleaning and then failing to serve a good dinner. When being offered cakes by the other tennis players, he says they already had dinner and adds with an ironical tone: “whiting and beeswax and washing blue, but it was dinner!” The aforementioned example suggests that the housework tends to keep her away from others or maybe the others just leave her to fulfill her tasks. Masters’ employment of passive voice in this case exemplifies that Mrs Schaefer was left at home by her husband and by the outside world.

Apart from material processes, the extracts also provide instances of relational processes in which Mrs Schaefer is realized as a Carrier or Token. The very nature of the relational process is one in which one entity is related, either through classification in the case of attributive clauses or through definition in the case of identifying clauses, to another entity or a quality (Halliday, 1994, pp. 112-128). In other words, relational processes are processes of ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’ and as such the question of effect or influence is less obvious if present at all. Here are some relational clauses with Mrs Schaefer’s participation or implied participation.

LC25a Mrs Schaefer was a very particular housekeeper

LC25g and she was fanatical about [cleaning windows]

LC27c she was overjoyed on two counts.

LC33 Another of her Saturday afternoon jobs was [to polish the little chest]

LC34e They (the drawers) were like eight little lamps gleaming in the dark shadows at the end of the hall

The above relational processes used by Masters build up a picture of Mrs Schaefer as a very particular housekeeper. They stress that apart from being a wife and a mother in the family, she takes on the duties of a housekeeper as well, as conventionally expected of women. In other words, Mrs Schaefer is responsible for ‘keeping the house’. Under this interpretation, Mrs Schaefer is involved in the material process “keep”, which interestingly reveals the interplay of relational and Material processes as seen in [LC25a]. In this example, “keep” would be identified as mental rather than as a Material process because it suggests a physiological behavior without any indicated movement. Masters’ use of the relational process “was” in [LC33] seems to add one more domestic duty to the many of Mrs Schaefer’s. Normally, Saturday and Sunday are considered to be family time when the whole family gathers together, either at home or on an outing. However, as a ‘very particular housekeeper’, Mrs Schaefer is depicted as still busy with her housework, especially cleaning and shining the little chest which she believes is the most valuable thing in the house. Again, in this example, Masters’ use of a relational process identifies Mrs Schaefer’s task but also puts her into another physical action with Material process, that is, “to polish the little chest”. Another instance of relational process in the extract is in [LC34e] which describes the
gleam of the drawers. This relational process signifies Mrs Schaefer’s domestic achievement. It means that her hard work and devotion pays off: the furniture shines spotlessly clean. In the context of numerous Material clauses in which Mrs Schaefer is the only Actor present, this relational clause also serves to depict Mrs Schaefer as the sole viewer and appreciator of the ‘gleaming’ she has achieved.

To depict Mrs Schaefer as concerned about the orderliness of the house and the little chest, Masters also involves her in several mental processes, as illustrated below:

LC11 Mrs Schaefer thought about moving the chest from the end of the hall to somewhere less conspicuous, where a door could shut it away from view.

LC14 Mrs Schaefer thought about [banning the little Colburn girl from the house].

LC27 When she found // she could reach the highest with the help of a carpenter’s tool, // she was overjoyed on two counts.

LC35 Elsie Colburn or no Elsie Colburn, Mrs Schaefer thought // when she was finished, // there was no other place for the chest but there.

The examples [LC11], [LC14] and [LC35] with Masters’ employment of the mental process “thought” express Mrs Schaefer’s consideration for how to protect the little chest from a neighbor’s child. The reason she keeps thinking about “banning the little Colburn girl from the house,” or about a suitable place or “somewhere less conspicuous” for the chest, is that whenever the girl comes, she usually “rush[ed] for it …, and sometimes put her arms around one end and lay her face on the top”. Taking the little chest as her own treasure, Mrs Schaefer wants to define her very own possession of it. She does not want anyone else to touch it, especially feeling worried that the neighbor’s girl may dirty it. These mental processes used by Masters further emphasize Mrs Schaefer’s concern for the cleanliness and orderliness of the house.

One interesting finding is that the majority of the sentences in the extracts of The Little Chest are in the declarative mood, with very few dialogues in the form of imperatives or interrogatives. The dominance of the declarative sentences in the text reveals the specific patterns attached to the texts in ‘the narrative mode’. It is also implied that Mrs Schaefer is linguistically depicted by Masters as so concentrated on and devoted to her house-keeping duties that she takes her obligations to them for granted, never complains or asks any questions about her role. As an Actor, Mrs Schaefer tries to finish her work on her own, with no interaction constructed during this process. It is also possible to take the view that Mrs Schaefer enjoys her chores so much that she does not wish to involve others in them; the chores may identify her to the extent that they become her, and her care of them is a kind of care of self, as no-one else seems to care about her. However, as mentioned earlier, considering her situation, it is more likely that she is merely involved in the task of entertaining herself in the midst of her loneliness and to hide her internal feelings about her unhappy marriage. Also through completing the housework, she is represented as trying to identify herself and her values with the image of a good housekeeper.

With the choice of process types demonstrating Mrs Schaefer’s industriousness and celebrating her achievement, Masters shows her approval and admiration for Mrs Schaefer’s efforts and commitment to household duties. However, at some points, the analysis reveals Masters’ concern about the fact that being a good housekeeper cannot help Mrs Schaefer secure her marriage and control her family life because her hard work is not often appreciated by her husband. Maybe her husband is not a good man as he often disrespects her housework and even mocks her publicly. It is unclear whether it is because she does not have a good relationship with her husband that she devotes her time to cleaning the house as a compensation for it, or whether she has become so obsessive with house cleaning that she disregards her other important familial tasks, making her husband feel disappointed and neglected, at which point their marriage becomes an unhappy one.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis of Transitivity patterns in The Little Chest, we can see that the traits of femininity are strongly represented by Masters via her main female character: Mrs Schaefer—a typical housekeeper.

Appearing Actors in the great distribution of Material processes in the data under investigation, Mrs Schaefer proves to be a family woman, actively and eagerly fulfilling her domestic duties. She doing what the society expects her to do as a woman and a wife: Mrs Schaefer keeps “cleaning”, “shining”, “scrubbing” the windows, the furniture, and the glass and china. She loves her jobs of ‘keeping the house’ and spends a lot of time and energy doing it.

Different from the conventional assumption that women are responsible for the domestic chores, to a certain extent, Masters’ female protagonists Mrs Schaefer achieves more than practicing the daily routines. This female character tries to search for her positions in the society through everyday household tasks and these daily chores help her to develop her identity, gain social recognition, and show her own definition of belonging. She can find the pleasure and locate her selfhood though performing these routines. To some extent, Mrs Schaefer’s effort and commitment to housework have paid off. For instance, Mrs Schaefer feels pleased and proud with her ‘spotlessly clean’ house. Masters’ suggestion is that she performs domestic routines as a way to achieve her agency and identity.

Throughout the story, Masters shows a lot of
admiration and respect for what Mrs Schaefer has done. She depicts Mrs Schaefer as a wonderful family woman who cares for and nurtures the family. However, there is a feeling that Masters seems not totally to approve of traditional feminine roles which are socially assigned to women. This is reflected in her depiction of Mrs Schaefer’s extreme dedication to housework in the sense that she overdoes it and becomes obsessive with it. Mrs Schaefer spends so much time and energy keeping the house clean that she may ignore the other domestic tasks and her work is not appreciated by her husband. She cannot balance her devotion to housework and her duty as a good wife.

In conclusion, with careful consideration of Transitivity patterns, it is clear that Masters demonstrates a traditional representation of femininity through the image of her main character Mrs Schaefer in *The Little Chest*. Mrs Schaefer sets a good example of feminine women who enjoy doing housework and practice it in ways to shape their identities and to perform their femininity. In this example, “keep” is identified as Behavioural rather than Material process because it suggests a physiological behavior without any indicated movement.

REFERENCES