

## A Semiotic Analysis of Gender Transformation Phases in Tempest's Tiresias: Indirect Expression across five Acts

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study explores the challenges and transformations experienced by the main character in the poetry of Tiresias by Tempest through the lens of gender fluidity and non-binary gender. By utilizing descriptive analytic content analysis based on the theory of Semiotics of Poetry by Riffaterre, this study fills the gap in surrounding gender-related studies that mostly focus on masculinity and femininity, without examining the fluidity of these terms. The results found that fluidity occurs due to circumstances, psychology, and true self-awareness, which influence one's gender identity and tend to be fluid on certain occasions. Although this poem doesn't specifically address the community itself, but more likely to reflect similar myths related to this issue it offers a rich poetic exploration of gender as a fluid, evolving, and often conflicted experience. Through the layered progression across these life stages, the poem reflects on how identity is continuously reconstructed amid social norms, personal crises, and corporeal transformations, highlighting both difficulties and possibilities of understanding self-journey.*

**KEYWORDS** - About five key words in alphabetical order, separated by comma

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Gender has been a major issue both in scientific research and literary analysis. Gender is derived from the Latin of *genus*, which means type or kind. Butler stated that gender “is an identity that tenuously constituted with time and space exteriorly instituted by stylized repetition acts” (1990:140). Thus, this attitude to gender has spread within the community, which then defines gender as not only a matter of sex but also something beyond. It refers to the attribute that determines one's boundaries, characteristics, features, and identity (Butler, 2004). However, the perspectives of gender have now been triggered by the change of natural circumstances for humans. On certain occasions, there is a situation where the acts of masculinity or femininity are no longer being held and resisted. Thus, the changeable identity of its gender, socio-culturally or even psychologically, leads to one having what is now known as gender fluidity (Muzakka, 2021:4).

Following this, Katz (2016) stated the term gender fluid, which correlates to those who feel that their identity often changes based on different moods, situations, or conditions. Katz stated that “as an identity, it typically fits below the non-binary and transgender umbrella in which people apply it to those who identify themselves as unmatched with the sex they were assigned on their original certificate”. In short, those who identified themselves under the term of non-binary stated that they do not identify as their born gender and, in certain circumstances, prefer to be identified as neutral.

However, this condition is still considered taboo, divergent, or even marginalized. Particularly in eastern countries such as Indonesia, this can be classified as social deviation that can lead to discrimination and bullying. As cited from BBC NEWS INDONESIA (online) in July, 22th 2025 stated:

"A Hasanuddin University student was publicly bullied by a lecturer for identifying as non-binary or neutral. This prompted Unhas Rector Jamaluddin Jompa to issue a public apology for his institution's lack of inclusivity and promise inclusivity for all. However, the bullying occurred not only directly but also indirectly through social media, where the student was accused of having a deviant sexual orientation and normalizing erroneous views within the university environment."

In contrast, the United States, as a liberal country, has legalized non-binary as a third gender identity in passports (CNN Indonesia: online). The positive development of non-binary gender in Western countries is also supported by a field study (Wickham, 2024), which found that the binary model is inappropriate when applied to the general population due to the complex nuances of individual gender. The study found that participants with unconfirmed binary identities experienced low treatment, resulting in self-dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and a tendency to lose authentic self-ownership.

Related to this, Brisbane highlighted the formation of such an organization named The Happy Hippie Foundation in which was supported by renowned singer Miley Cyrus in order to support agender people to gain freedom of self-expression. But this social awareness and acceptance of non-binary identities is not only achieved by community initiatives but also through free writing or compositions in the form of essays, novels, and poems. In literature, gender is not merely a distinction between male and female characters but also a reflection of human social life. Voigt (1987) stated that poems, for example, are one of the arts that must be genderless. It means literary works are not influenced by any kind of stigma or beliefs but rather are free and focus more on reflecting real human life. One of those wonderful poems, which primarily discusses gender issues, particularly non-binary, is the one that was written by Kae Tempest entitled *Tiresias*.

In their (pronoun for non-binary) anthology book entitled *Hold Your Own*, Tempest compared the presence of teenagers who face the challenges of gender instability. They (pronoun refers to Tempest as non-binary) were inspired by the myth of *Tiresias*, a prophet cursed to become a woman by the goddess *Hera*. In narrative semiotics perspectives, one of their poem entitled *Tiresias* shows the challenges and transformation overcome by non-binary gender symbolically and uniquely through poetic devices. For example, as the following cited lines

The **boy in her is strong some days** And calls out **for a girl to touch**

The **girl in her is full of rage**

And craves the things she hates so much

The Woman *Tiresias* line-10 (Chapter *Womanhood*)

Watching **his body like it wasn't his**

He pushed his **new shape To the edge of the clearing**

The Man *Tiresias* line-8 (Chapter *Manhood*)

Both data sets show the emergence of gender fluidity motifs represented by symbols such as girl, body, and shape. Additionally, the symbols are expressed through imagery language, which illustrates some of the poem's subtleties, like the edge of clearing. It is evident from the two data snippets above that the character experiences a "boy in her" at specific points during the female phase. The verse 'for a girl to touch' suggests that homogeneous (lesbian) contact can sometimes reinforce this male power. However, when the character experiences a "new shape" or a new identity during the male phase, this masculine sense becomes stronger.

The passage calls into question the motivations and significance of Kae Tempest's depictions of non-binary identities in the poems that are included in the poem entitled *Tiresias*. The information shows that the speaker went through a developmental process, progressing from adolescence to a later stage that the poet called the *Blind Prophet* chapter. In the larger literary landscape, there are still not many literary works that address social issues pertaining to non-binary gender identities. Comparative analyses of earlier research indicate that because non-binary gender is a persistent social issue, literary exploration of this topic is still very relevant today.

Several societies that acknowledge more than the conventional binary gender system have historical and cultural precedents for non-binary identities. The need for research that looks at how people with non-binary identities come to accept themselves as a reflection of society's views on gender diversity is underscored by the fact that social resistance frequently persists in acceptance of gender neutrality and fluidity. Works that

highlight non-binary gender themes in literary promotion are frequently constrained and prioritize fixed transitions between binary genders over the idea of gender fluidity, which refers to the continuous, non-linear evolution of gender identity. In order to investigate the dynamic shifts in a person's gender experience and offer insights relevant to situations where gender norms are still inflexible or conventional, this study uses their one particular and selected poem in their anthology entitled Tiresias.

Furthermore, this study looks at the symbols that stand for the subject's gender identity as well as the acceptance and transformation of gender fluidity itself, in contrast to earlier research that has generally concentrated on the perspectives of non-binary characters or subjects regarding their self-identity. In light of these considerations, this study is still pertinent and makes a substantial contribution to the field of gender literature, which encourages more research that focuses on non-binary identities and the wider range of gender nonconformity.

Given the background information provided, the study's main focus is on the poet's portrayal of the dynamic process of gender transformation in the poetry anthology. The term "transformation" describes how a character's gender status changes throughout the poems, going from female to male and then to non-binary. The representation of gender identity based on diction, meaning, symbolic elements, and particular linguistic symbols is one way to observe this shift. Consequently, this study specifically analyses about which linguistic and symbolic devices are employed to depict gender in the chosen poems from Kae Tempest.

## II. RESEARCH THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEWS

In this section, several former studies related to the present research are reviewed, consisting of articles, theses, and dissertations. The overview of the theory that is used to analyze the objective of the study is also explained in this section. Thus, it is important to break down the analysis into several key concepts in order to shape the understanding. Therefore, the key concepts that are discussed in this study include the fluidity of gender, non-binary identities, and the core concept of Semiotics theory by Riffaterre (1978), namely matrix, model, and variant. Thus, this study primarily uses Riffaterre's idea about Semiotics of Poetry as the main tool to analyze the data.

First of all, reviews from previous related studies are important as they can give another perspective, viewpoint, reflection, and reference to the present study. Several articles have discussed the issue of gender both in general and in literature. One of them is the study entitled "*Michael Riffaterre's Semiotics on William Shakespeare's A Madrigal (Semiotic Analysis on Poetry)*", which was written by Pradani and Rizal (2020). This research had found that Shakespeare represents the meaning of his poetry using four semiotic aspects and sub-aspects: morphological changes, syntactic extraction, semantic normative forms in heuristic reading, and the existence of meaning changes, meaning distortion, and meaning formation as the second aspect. The existence of matrices, models, and variants is the third factor; the use of actual hypogram potential is the fourth. However, in terms of the problem's focus, this research differs significantly from present research. This research expands these semiotic elements to create a work with non-binary gender meaning, whereas the subsequent research only examines the meaning-formation process by taking into account the outcomes of Riffaterre's semiotic application. Although the gaps seem obvious, this study is still relevant as it gives a new perspective on the appliance within the same theory.

Another similar study is from Minton (2021) entitled "*Gender Fluidity and the Unexplored Side of Hemingway*". Minton employs a descriptive research approach by using dialogue and narrative snippets from Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*. Minton concentrates on using literary theory to alter the characters' actions and social perspectives throughout the book. According to Minton's research, Hemingway, one of the forerunners of modernist literature, explores a number of facets of gender fluidity, including polyamorous love and gender transition. Additionally, Minton contrasts the portrayal of the trans-masculine side of men in the novel *The Garden of Eden*, which shares a similar point of view with this study, with the image of Hemingway's earlier works that carry the theme of ideal masculinity.

Moreover, Stehlíková (2022) in the thesis entitled “*New Future Selves: Gender Fluidity in the Short Stories of Jackie Kay and Ali Smith*” found that short story literature in Scotland reflects the growing concept of gender fluidity. The study gathered information from a selection of short stories by Jackie Kay and Ali Smith using qualitative research methods. In order to develop Butler and Marinucci's feminist and queer postmodern framework of gender theory in character performance, Stehlíková focused on recognizing social regulation, intersectionality, and gender plurality represented through cultural symbols. The study found that the tendency toward fluid and unstable gender can be influenced by the binary heterogeneity of same-sex couples and the tendency for subtle orientational shifts that begin with the ambiguity of individual performance in their gender.

Similarly, Vergoosen (2021) has also conducted research written on a dissertation entitled “*Breaking the Binary: Attitudes towards and Cognitive Effects of Gender-Neutral Pronouns*”, which concluded that neutral pronouns are used in an ideological and pragmatic "convincing" process. This suggests that the adoption of these pronouns involves social cognition. This is a significant research source that backs up the findings of this study, demonstrating that certain pronouns in poetry can reflect gender neutrality even when they don't refer to people. Additionally, Vargoossen's work clarifies the connection between psychology, gender, and language, making it a useful comparison point for this study's data analysis.

Despite the related major issue, the present study seeks to delve deeper into the meaning and implied meaning used through literary works to uncover non-binary issues. This study focuses more on the dynamic transformation, conflicting ideas of transformation, and the existence and presence of certain forms of gender and gender identity (feminine, masculine, neutral, bisexual, lesbian, or gay). In doing so, this study employs the theory of Semiotics of Poetry by Riffaterre as a tool to discover the layered meaning, uncovering the message related to these challenging gender issues through the poetic devices in Tiresias' poem. Therefore, a brief explanation of this theory is necessary.

Semiotics, or semiology, is the term derived from the Greek semeion, meaning "sign" or "seme," which refers to the interpretation of signs (Ratna, 2013:97). Following this, as stated by Pelz (1992:6), semiotics are sciences studying signs in general, defining the semiotics as the science of sign in general (Semiotik ist die Wissenschaft von den Zeichen allgemein). It is essentially an extension of the structural theory, where, within its development has split into several concepts, including one proposed by Pierce, Barthes, and Riffaterre. Among these, one from Riffaterre is often applied in a poetry analysis due to its relevance to textual data consisting of key word elements, meaning, phrase meaning, as well as mythological references such as those to the Greek mythology of Tiresias by fitting into Riffaterre's hypogram concepts.

Riffaterre's semiotic theory involves several core components for comprehensively understanding poetry and its implied and layered meaning. One of which is the reading technique. Pradopo stated that two reading techniques must be carried on while doing a literary analysis, particularly poetry (2003). First is the heuristic reading, which means clarifying the meanings and synonyms of the words that are uncommon or specialized in poetry (Endraswara, 2008). Thus, this method is used to uncover the direct or textual meaning of the poem, which is both the mimetic and referential meanings within the poem's structure. Secondly is the hermeneutic reading, which means the retroactive reading. Retroactive reading means holistically interpreting the conventions that occur within the poem, and in this stage, the reader finds deeper and more complex meaning beyond literal interpretation.

According to Riffaterre (1978), poetic language conveys meaning indirectly or implies the meaning differently from the literal definition. This leads to discontinuity of meaning, which is consciously used by the poet to emphasize their implicit meaning. There are three factors influencing this discontinuity. (1) Displacing of meaning means the use of figurative language such as simile, metaphor, personification, allegory, metonymy, synecdoche, and epic comparison that replace the literal meanings with poetic meaning (Pradopo, 2003; Sayuti, 1985). (2) Distorting of meaning means the use of ambiguity, contradiction (such as irony and paradox), and nonsense statements to create multiple interpretations and mystery (Pradopo, 2007, 2010). Ambiguity is mostly

used to encourage curiosity, while irony conveys meaning opposite its literal definition. In contrast, paradox is often applied to present seemingly contradictory but true forms, and nonsense is used to play with the sound of the literal meaning. (3) Creating meaning means the structuring principles of rhyme, enjambment, and typography are used to create meaning beyond linguistic significance. These are textual devices that organize poems to evoke additional interpretations (Riffaterre, 1978).

Moreover, Riffaterre introduced the term matrix, model, and variant in analyzing poetry. A poem starts with a matrix, which can be a single word, phrase, or short sentence that develops into a more intricate explanation. A word or sentence that symbolizes a stanza or other significant element in the poem serves as the actualization of the matrix. The various lines or expressions that alter or explain the model are known as variants. A poem progresses from matrix to model and then to variants since matrices and models are variations of the same structure (Riffaterre, 1978).

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This research started by applying the reading method to identify and collect the data. Riffaterre has stated that reading method is a critical thinking process that involves comprehension and acceptance of information when reading a text to classify its content and meaning. Although there are four different reading methods based on Riffaterre's reading method, this study employed only two of them, namely the heuristic reading (the early reading stage to uncover linguistic anomalies in literary work) and hermeneutic reading (interpretation stage). Following this, observational method with purposive sampling technique and note-taking technique are used to collect the data.

According to Zuchri (2021), the terms "population" and "sample" are not the same in qualitative research as they are in quantitative research, where they refer to research subjects and units of analysis, respectively. The Kae Tampest poetry Tiresias serves as the unit of observation in this study, meaning and signs serve as the object, and the researcher serves as the human instrument. As a result, the sample refers to chosen data that offer pertinent information based on purposive criteria connected to matrix, model, or variant elements with gender-related meanings and binary or interpretative significance, whereas the population comprises data from the observation units categorized by the researcher under the research focus.

In order to interpret and draw conclusions, this study used qualitative descriptive-analytic content analysis (Zuchdi, 1993). In the analysis process, hermeneutic reading is applied to uncover hidden layers of meaning and distinctive linguistic features after heuristic reading is used to identify its grammatical irregularities and linguistic meaning. The new symbolic interpretations are then created by comparing the literal meanings of the linguistic features and elements found, such as in the form of words, phrases, clauses, simple sentences, slang, pronouns, names, and terms within the lines or stanzas as a whole. Following the identification of matrices, models, and variants denoting gender elements, these connotative or symbolic meanings are chosen for their contextual significance in representing gender identities. After checking for hypograms in the poetry through retroactive reading, Riffaterre's semiotic theory is used to examine how meaning is constructed.

This study uses descriptive sentences and an informal presentation style to present the analysis results (Sudaryanto, 1993). Through the collection of qualitative data and the elaboration of words, phrases, and sentences, the presentation includes symbol descriptions and interpretations found in the poem. Philosophical justifications and concepts of the analysis results are also incorporated into the descriptive-analytic technique.

### **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In this part, the result and the analysis are discussed thoroughly and in detail. Regarding the data, the poem Tiresias is an opening poem of Tempest's anthology book entitled *Hold Your Own*. However, it is chosen itself, without engaging the other poems from the anthology, because it has already conveyed complex and meaningful interpretation related to gender. This poem, Tiresias, consists of approximately 566 lines, which is written in unstructured stanzas and has a length of at least 20 pages. Several models actualize the main matrix of this poem.



In general, this poem is divided into several transformation phases and acts. These include adolescence and puberty, the emergence of sexual desire and early indications of gender transformation, the transformation of male to female, existential crisis due to physical and psychological changes, the journey into a new phase and the return of the masculine side, as well as conflicts regarding sexual pleasure based on gender. Each section in the poem (line) containing these models is elaborated through the use of linguistic and symbolic elements as well as poetic components within the poem. The elements can be described as follows.

Picture the scene:  
A **boy** of fifteen  
—Line 1-2

This poem starts with the use of imagery as a symbolic element to stimulate the readers' imagination of the main character. By the use of a noun referring to a male child, it is known that the main character is masculine. Based on the diction used, the character of the poem is still a teenager. There is no specific meaning that is constructed in regard of gender change yet, but the use of this imagery scenario makes the character of the poem stand out. This is also seemingly like the poet tries to emphasize the existence of a fifteen-year-old male.

Give him **limbs that are awkward**  
But know **how to climb**.  
—Line 9-10

As can be seen, the ninth line uses the noun limbs, which normally refers to a person's arms or legs (Oxford: online). Awkward arms and legs are provided to the character in this instance, who is referred to using the third-person pronoun him. The adjective "awkward" when used in reference to the arms and legs literally means "difficult to use or deal with," "an embarrassing and nervous state," or "moving in an unnatural and uncomfortable pattern in relation to body function" (Oxford: online). The character can use them to climb, though. It can be concluded that Tempest uses a displacement of meaning to illustrate a stark contrast because the phrase "give him awkward limbs and know how to climb me" seems to have no meaning.

This is known as parallelism in linguistics, though, when two or more phrases or clauses have the same balanced grammatical structure. Both lines begin with verb phrases and are imperative clauses. When formulated, it would be an ellipsis of [Give him limbs] but [limbs that] are capable of climbing. It is clear from this structural play that Tempest, implicitly, gives meaning to what initially appears to be absurd, giving readers a greater sense of emotional emphasis. This sensation alludes to the character's exceptional ability to use awkward arms and legs for climbing. The actual meaning of these arms and legs encourages a curiosity into questions about the exact meaning of this wordplay.

The nouns arms and legs may be connected to stereotypical ideas about masculinity when discussing gender issues. Because the next line claims that the character can use these limbs despite society's perception that they are abnormal, it is interpreted as a stereotype. This is then linked to the masculine side because, according to the possible hypogram, this line still alludes to line two's original imagery, which Tempest highlights as a representation of adolescence (a boy). Additionally, Tempest's wordplay conveys the idea that even though these limbs are abnormal (not consistent with typical masculine associations), the phrase "know how to climb" paired grammatically with awkward limbs alludes to the character's flexibility and resilience in the face of such stereotypes.

Slumps in the shower  
Like a **frog in the rain.**  
Winks at the mirror – **does cool, does charm.**  
**Shaves soft skin.**  
Nods at the pain.  
**No hair yet. Soon though.**  
—Line 17-22

Ten lines before the above lines, it is mentioned that the character experiences puberty (psychological, including mood and feeling change), which results in a conflicted desire to go to school. According to the earlier analysis, puberty's chaos is the cause of this struggle. A possible hypogramic analysis connecting lines one through ten with lines seventeen through twenty-two in the poem lends credence to this interpretation. The poet compares the character to a frog in the rain in these final lines. The nouns "frog" and "rain," which are frequently used in numerous proverbs, are included in this simile. Because of its metamorphosis cycle, the frog itself frequently represents transformation in many cultures, whereas rain is usually connected to fertility and blessings (Agustin, 2010: 45–46).

The link between myth and natural phenomena regarding frogs and rain is further supported by scientific research. Research by Ogielska and Kotusz (2021) and Narayan (2015) demonstrates that for some frog species, the rainy season serves as a crucial environmental cue that initiates reproductive activity. According to these studies, rain causes both male and female frogs' gonadal hormones to become active. This scientific realization enhances the poetic imagery that depicts a boy waiting to become a man by referencing "shaving soft skin" (referring to the fine hair on genital organs) and "no hair yet soon though" (signaling the start of puberty). The character's increasing sexual maturity is indicated by the emphasis on genital hair.

These three data clusters implied that *Tempest* conveyed puberty and adolescence as the first realization of the poem's matrix. Referring back to the first and second lines, where *Tempest* specifically highlights the image of a fifteen-year-old youth, as evidence of adolescent depiction, allowing readers to understand the scenes that follow as representations of typical teenage thought and act. Additionally, the analysis reveals the character's emotional and physical turmoil, which is conveyed through metaphors such as "no hair yet soon though," which refers to the emergence of pubic hair, and "give limbs that awkward but know how to climb," which symbolizes bodily development from childhood to adolescence.

Snakes. Two snakes!  
**Coiling, uncoiling**  
**Boiling and cooling**  
—Line 53-55

Next, the poem moves to the following stanza, introducing a new model and depicting the next life phase through imagery, hypogram, linguistic elements such as diction choice, and symbolic elements involving an entity linked to a particular myth. In the excerpt above, it is noticeable that *Tempest* employs end consonant sound repetition in the words coiling, uncoiling, boiling, and cooling. According to Riffaterre (1978), this technique aims to create meaning by directing the reader's attention to the words involved in the rhyme. Here, the poet not only uses rhyme but also actualizes a hypogram by symbolizing snakes mating, which references Tiresias. As mentioned previously, Tiresias is an allusive figure in the poem connected with snakes within mythology.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (3.316–338), it is recounted that Tiresias was cursed to change into a woman because he separated two snakes that were mating. In this myth, snakes symbolize identity and gender

transformation, as explained: “Having struck two mating serpents, Tiresias is transformed—suggesting that snakes embody a liminal space between binaries, and can catalyze bodily metamorphosis” (Montiglio, 2000:108). From this, Tiresias is regarded as a tangible representation of the snake as a liminal creature—existing between worlds such as earth and underworld, life and death, male and female—serving as an agent of change and sacred power.

Moreover, within the rhyme pattern, the word coiling refers to wrapping or twisting, symbolizing the awakening life force (libido) according to Greek mythology, while uncoiling represents the release of this energy (orgasm). Additionally, boiling symbolizes intense sexual desire, as suggested by Freud (1920), while cooling refers to the decline of desire or passivity, as described by Laqueur (1990:42). Therefore, the poet performs a displacement of meaning (Riffaterre, 1978) in these lines where these four words collectively illustrate the sexual process: arousal, orgasm, peak desire, and post-orgasmic cooling.

He stares:  
They **spoil each other**.  
They **do things**  
He **has only dreamt of doing**.  
—Line 59-62

Based on the imagery depicted by Tempest, the main character is represented as male through the use of the pronoun *he*, who is described as observing two snakes marked with the plural pronoun *they*. The poet emphasizes the meaning further by choosing the verb *stare* instead of other simpler verbs like *see* or *look*. Literally, *stare* means to look at something for a long time with wide-open eyes and focused attention (Cambridge Dictionary online). In this context, the character is portrayed as seriously and attentively watching the two snakes that are mating.

In the lines above, the two snakes are shown as indulging or stimulating each other, engaging in activities that the main character can only dream about. Tempest uses metaphor and implication to describe these sexual acts with a euphemism—*do things*. According to Chapman and Kipfer (2008), *do things* is a euphemistic phrase commonly used in American teenage slang to refer politely to sexual activities. When linked to the irony created by the poet that the character can only dream about these acts, there is a shift in meaning: dreaming about *do things* implicitly suggests that the character already has mature thoughts related to sexuality and physical relationships. This implies that the character is now in an adult phase and no longer a boy (a child or adolescent male) as portrayed in the first part of this poem titled *Tiresias*. The character’s mind is no longer as innocent as that of an average young boy.

His body’s responding to **something beyond him**.  
Swells where before there were dips.  
A **crunching of muscle**, the hips  
Opening up, **bones roaring**,  
Beneath them, boyhood shrinking, falling  
inwards.  
Thinking nothing.  
Feeling *new blood rushing*  
—Line 86-92

The previous argument is strengthened by the lines above. As mentioned earlier, the word *raw* in lines seven and eight refers to things beyond the character’s expectations. This is supported by the phrase *something*



*beyond him* in line eighty-six, which points to external forces and influences unfamiliar to the character (referring to sexual relations symbolized by the snakes). The line *his body responds to something above* means that the character and his body naturally react to this change, though still unconsciously (hormonal and desire-wise).

Also, the phrase *swelling where once was hollow* symbolically represents body changes associated with puberty. In the context of the Tiresias myth, this refers to trans-masculine and trans-feminine experiences, with *hollow* meaning body curves or shapes that were once flat or empty. The word *swells* literally means becoming wider or fuller (Cambridge dictionary online), suggesting the emergence of natural body curves.

Another interesting point is the implicit meaning of internal conflict between norms and identity expressed through the phrases *crunching of muscle* and *bones roaring*. The gerund *crunching* means crushing or squeezing (often with the mouth) paired with *muscle*, while *bones* combined with the gerund *roaring* means loud and strong. Together, they metaphorically suggest that during this phase, puberty brings physical pain from transformation and reflects the “body horror” theory by Preciado (2013), where the body mediates between social norms and self-identity (including sexual desire).

From this analysis, it can be concluded that the second part of the poem (lines 5–66) reflects the emergence of sexual desire and related conflicts. Generally, this section portrays new feelings of intimacy symbolized by mating snakes and expressed linguistically through chosen words like *do things*, *coiling*, *uncoiling*, *boiling*, *cooling*, *raw*, and *tortured*. The poet also shifts the literal meanings of these words to emphasize transformation and increasing desire. Additionally, similes, metaphors, and irony are used to guide readers to understand the character’s inner struggles during this transition.

Finally, a new phase begins at the end of this excerpt with the phrase *feeling new blood rushing*. *New blood* is a strong metaphor that can refer to menstruation, erection, sexual passion, or more broadly, the awakening of a new identity. Blood symbolically relates to fertility, initiation, and sexuality, especially in rituals about adulthood or gender transformation (Turner, 1969). Thus, this phrase marks the end of the transitional phase and the start of a new one focused on gender transformation and identity, which will be elaborated in the following lines.

**He will be more than the sum of his parts.**  
**He shakes and shouts, a screwed-up mouth.**  
**A pain that only women know**  
—Line 97-99

After the transitional phase of adolescence and puberty, Tempest moves into the next stage, marked linguistically and symbolically by a transformation from masculine to feminine. This shift is clearly shown through language use, especially in the pronouns referring to the main character. In the first two lines of the excerpt above, Tempest initially uses the male pronoun *he*, but then suddenly switches to the female pronoun *she*, even though it still refers to the same character. This deliberate play with words shifts the linguistic function and meaning (as described by Riffaterre, 1978) of these nouns—from simply pointing to a person to carrying gender identity and differentiation within them.

Additionally, the poet intentionally uses *ungrammaticality*—a purposeful break from expected semantic and grammatical rules (Riffaterre, 1978:2–4)—to create tension in meaning. This pushes the reader to look for interpretations beyond the literal sense, especially in phrases like *a pain that only women know*. Grammatically, this is “incorrect” because the subject indicated by *he* at the beginning is suddenly linked to a feminine experience of pain, which traditionally is understood to be exclusive to women. Similarly, the

metaphor *she will become more than a part of herself* suggests a deeper sense of self or identity that cannot be simply classified by physical or morphological characteristics, but also involves elements beyond the body.

Against **her new face, her new chest,**  
The **new flesh of her arm**  
—Line 112-113

Next, Tempest uses repetition by placing the adjective *new* three times in a row, as seen in the excerpt above. This repetition creates a special relationship in meaning, highlighting the poet's intention to emphasize this word. Literally, *new* means something recently created, just beginning to exist, or different from what came before (Cambridge Dictionary online). In this context, the adjective *new* is paired with the nouns *face*, *breast*, and *flesh*. This suggests that the poet is referring to a newly formed face, a breast that is just beginning to develop, and flesh that is unlike before.

Looking deeper, these three nouns symbolize the emergence of a new entity, a new identity, and a new body. This interpretation is supported not only by analyzing these phrases individually but also by their connection—through a potential hypogram—to lines 102 to 108, where the poet emphasizes the decline of masculine power and the rise of feminine power. This repetition of *new* thus reinforces the theme of transformation and rebirth, pointing to the profound changes taking place within the character's identity and physical form.

Give her a face that is kind, that belongs  
To a woman you know  
Who is strong  
And believes in **the rightness of doing things**  
**wrong**  
—Line 130-133

After the rise of feminine agency within the character, the poem depicts her developing and embracing this feminine strength. This is evident in the excerpt above, where the poet uses symbolic imagery to invite readers to connect the main character with a real, empowered woman. According to Butler (1990), this reflects an effort to strengthen realist feminism by portraying women as real human beings with both power and contradictions. The strength is poetically expressed through the line *woman you know who is strong*. Here, the phrase *you know* suggests a shared understanding—an assumption that everyone, including the reader, recognizes this woman's strength.

Alongside this, the poet introduces contradiction in the phrase *the rightness of doing things wrong*, presenting the woman as an anti-heroic figure. This line, both implicitly and explicitly, addresses societal norms that restrict behavior, especially in cultures that impose different standards on men and women. Yet, the character in Tempest's poem believes in the righteousness of her actions, even when they are considered 'wrong'. This refers to the process of gender transformation, which many societies traditionally view as deviant behavior. Tempest subtly suggests that the character's defiance of these norms can be seen as a heroic struggle for something greater. This also touches on stereotypes of women being expected to be obedient, proper, and controlled within patriarchal cultures (Beauvoir, 1949).

From this analysis, it can be concluded that the model represented in this section focuses on the transformation from masculine to feminine and the emergence of feminine power. However, the element of fluidity begins to appear in the following phase of the character's journey. In the next stage, the character faces

an existential crisis brought on by this transformation process, along with the internal conflict that comes with it, as described in the upcoming excerpts.

She liked to **giggle with the pretty boys** and  
kiss the **lonely addicts**  
And weave **exquisite curtains for the dismal**  
**little attics**  
Where they **lay their heads at night**  
—Line 162-164

Phrases like *giggle with the pretty boys* and *kiss the lonely addicts* combine unusual elements—light, affectionate gestures—with people who are marginalized. The poet's choice of keywords such as *pretty boys* and *lonely addicts* refers to gender nonconformity (pretty boys) and those seen as outcasts or metaphorical societal rejects (lonely addicts). According to Riffaterre's theory (1978: 5–7), this creates semantic tension that develops into forms of ungrammaticality. In simple terms, this tension clashes with conventional expectations of meaning. The main character—now depicted as female—consciously and willingly enters social spaces filled with lonely and “pretty” men, where “pretty” carries connotations linked to trans identities, such as calabai or ngondek. This illustrates a contrast between the stigma of women as passive beings who only exist within heteronormative relationships and the poet's ideal portrayal of women as free and unbound, symbolized by *giggle* and *kiss*, which suggest freedom and detachment.

Supported by the phrase *weave exquisite curtains*, the character not only creates an interactive space between herself—as a fluid individual—and this marginalized environment of “pretty boys,” but also gives symbolic meaning to a warm, safe refuge for these outsiders. The warmth and comfort are metaphorically expressed through the *exquisite curtains* placed in a *gloomy little attic*. Beyond being a metaphor, this phrase also highlights the ironic relationship between the beautiful curtains and the dim attic. The curtains suggest kindness, newness, and liberated beauty, while the attic represents a small, isolated, and hidden place. Together, the curtains serve as a symbolic element—an effort to open safe spaces for individuals who exist on society's fringes.

**He was an older man,**  
A man who liked to **hold her hand**  
A man who **made her feel like she was rolling**  
**round on golden sand**  
—Line 178-180

This poem may seem simple and narrative at first, but the metaphor “*rolling round on golden sand*” reveals a deeper semantic tension. The phrase does not describe a concrete action but rather evokes an emotional and sensual effect wrapped in symbolic imagery. Its meaning can't be grasped literally, creating a kind of ungrammaticality in meaning (Riffaterre, 1978: 5–7). In this context, the man is portrayed as both emotional and physical support, while the woman experiences a sense of dependence—one that is framed as being made to feel special (Beauvoir, 1949). This reflects an implicit power structure in gender roles, where men remain the givers (holding hands, offering pleasant experiences) and women are the receivers (comfort, pleasure). The strong figure mentioned by the poet earlier now fades away, replaced by cultural stigmas and stereotypes portraying women as needing support and care. The confident, norm-defying character from earlier is overshadowed here by a more vulnerable, dependent side.

The phrase “*like she was rolling round on golden sand*” creates a soft, sensual atmosphere. This imagery implies that the relationship is not just physical but also psychological, offering a kind of escape from a potentially harsh or cold reality. According to Irigaray (1985), women in intimate spaces are often represented as beings who *feel* rather than *act*. Here, the woman is not given the narrative of making choices—she is “made

to feel,” rather than “choosing to feel.” Still, the poem can also be seen as an expression of a woman’s emotional agency—a search for tenderness and safety that might be missing in other relationships.

**Who was I when I was here last?**

If this isn’t home

Then **where has home gone?**

—Line 230-232

Although the three lines of this poem are grammatically correct, the rhetorical questions expressing a lost and shifting identity reveal a semantic mismatch. The subject no longer recognizes herself in a place that should feel familiar, as shown by the phrase *Who was I when I was here last?* Similarly, *If this isn't home* creates a dissonance between past experiences and the present reality, conflicting with the reader's semantic expectations (Riffaterre, 1978:7). The poem’s underlying theme, or hypogram, can be traced to narratives of identity searching after transition, trauma, or migration. Here, *home* isn’t just a physical place but an internal state—the comfort of being at ease with oneself.

From a gender perspective, the question “*Who am I*” can be understood as reflecting the journey of trans-identity or a deep gender role transformation. Changes in social, biological, and emotional identity can make once-safe spaces feel foreign. Gender identity evolves over time and is performative, as Butler (1990) explains, so losing the sense of *home* relates to losing the connection between the surrounding space and one’s new identity.

The question *Then where has home gone?* expresses the tension between past and present identity. In terms of gender, it asks where a place exists for someone who has changed and no longer fits within the norms of their original home. Beauvoir (1949) notes that women and marginalized groups often feel alienated from *home* because that home was constructed around rules they didn’t create and that don’t fully embrace them.

**Her** body stops. **She** feels his might.

**His** veins thicken in intense delight

—Line 290-291

In the final stage of the character’s life, they ultimately return to their original assigned gender. The lines describing *her body stopping* and *his veins hardening tightly and intensely* reveal a meaningful contrast through the possessive adjectives *her* and *his*. The phrase about the body stopping, linked to the feminine possessive *her*, symbolizes a decline in feminine agency, while the mention of veins strengthening with the masculine possessive *his* suggests a rise in masculine agency. This tension and opposition in meaning create an imbalance (Riffaterre, 1978), leading to the interpretation that the character has reverted to their original gender identity.

**A man again.**

He stands, confused

—Line 292-293

The phrase *A man again* may be simple in structure, but it carries a deep semantic tension about identity. The word *again* suggests that the person was previously not recognized as a man—or perhaps was not a man at all. This introduces a meaning that conflicts with traditional or normative interpretations (Riffaterre, 1978). When readers see the line *He stands, confused*, they face ambiguity: is this confusion caused by change, a loss of identity, or a rejection of masculinity itself? This opens a hermeneutic gap that calls for contextual interpretation (Riffaterre, 1983: 12).

In this light, *A man again* indicates that manhood is not a fixed state but a fluid social construct that can be altered and renewed. This aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender as performative rather than innate. Furthermore, the male character's confusion can be read as a kind of disorientation when traditional patriarchal masculinity no longer provides a firm foundation. The man in the poem appears lost and possibly disconnected from himself. This challenges the patriarchal discourse that values control, certainty, and stability. Through this, the poem exposes the fragility of male gender identity and deconstructs the myth of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005).

This poor **once-boy, sudden-woman**,  
Who'd lived so long and done so well  
And **kept so much so deeply hidden**,  
Now **found himself** before the bell  
**Of some new door in some new town.**  
The **pain of new beginnings**.  
Everything that went before  
Gushed in him.  
Water overfilling  
—Line 296-304

In the excerpt above, the very first line presents a clear mismatch both syntactically and semantically with the phrase *this poor once-boy, sudden woman*. The character's identity shifts abruptly from *boy* to *woman*, with a significant difference in age implied. The noun *boy* commonly refers to a child or adolescent male, typically a young male (Cambridge Dictionary online), while *woman* refers to an adult female. This sharp contrast creates a hermeneutic gap, requiring readers to look beyond the literal meaning to understand the deeper significance (Riffaterre, 1978).

Additionally, the phrase *some new door in some new town* symbolizes not only physical change but also existential transformation—across space and time. Butler (1990) describes this as the reconstruction of gender, highlighting gender as a social performance that can shift, collapse, and be rebuilt. The line *kept so much so deeply hidden* reflects a core queer or trans narrative, where many individuals conceal their identity, desires, or trauma just to survive within heteronormative norms (Sedgwick, 1990). When the character finally reaches a *new beginning*, the pain erupts like a *gush*, symbolizing an emotional and memory explosion. These lines thus emphasize self-recognition and acceptance—that becoming oneself and discovering identity doesn't mean escaping suffering and alienation.

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on a comprehensive analysis of the entire opening poem, which consists of 566 lines, it can be concluded that *Tiresias* is structured into five main life stages plus an additional supplementary chapter. These five life stages represent the core matrix of the poem—namely, the transformation of identity and gender, alongside the search for selfhood within the framework of gender fluidity. This matrix is embodied through five distinct life phases, each represented by a specific model.

The first phase focuses on puberty, depicting the transformation from adolescence to adulthood. The second stage explores adulthood itself, highlighting the awakening of sexual desire and early indications of gender transformation. The third phase centers on the rise of feminine agency and the weakening of masculine power, portraying the transition from masculinity to femininity. The fourth stage addresses a deep existential crisis as the character faces the struggle of rejecting and then accepting a new identity. Lastly, the closing phase portrays the character confronting the final journey and ultimately returning to masculinity.

Besides these main stages, there is an additional chapter that deals with the complexities and tensions surrounding sexual pleasure and gender. However, this chapter was not analyzed in detail since its focus shifts

away from the main character as an active agent of gender transformation. Instead, the primary figure here becomes more of an observer and sexual advisor to two new central figures: Zeus and Hera.

In sum, Tiresias offers a rich poetic exploration of gender as a fluid, evolving, and often conflicted experience. Through the layered progression across these life stages, the poem reflects on how identity is continuously reconstructed amid social norms, personal crises, and corporeal transformations. It highlights both the difficulties and possibilities inherent in the journey toward self-understanding and acceptance, making it a profound commentary on the nature of gender identity in contemporary literature.

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