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Word of the day:

WOMAN

Language can reveal to us a lot about human nature, everywhere in the world. A friend of mine once asked people to imagine a very strange sign on the side of a road. It's one of those signs with a picture on it and no words. So, imagine a female figure – you can tell that it's female by the skirt – dropping a wrapper. Imagine the usual red circle around it with a diagonal red slash, the signal for, "Don't do this!"

We scratch our heads and say, "Gosh, why does the sign read No Littering by WOMEN? Can MEN throw garbage around? That's not fair!"

What's going on here? Or imagine another scene. Suppose a girl walks into a room where three of her girl-friends are in the middle of wrapping paper, boxes, scissors, and tape.

She's been taught for twelve years in school that you're never supposed to say POLICEMAN but POLICE OFFICER, because some policemen are women, and you're never supposed to say FIREMAN but FIRE FIGHTER, because some firemen are women. But it doesn't matter. Human nature takes over anyway, and she asks, "Hey, what are you guys doing?"



GUYS! Why does she do that?

Once I was at a museum in a village in Newfoundland. That is a part of Canada, a large island in the Atlantic Ocean. It's kind of all by itself out there, and people have a funny way of talking that you won't hear anywhere else. They say MOUSE almost as if it were MOOSE, which could lead to some confusion:

"Ma, Ma, come and look! Mittens has caught a MOOSE!"

"Oh, not another one! I thought I told you to block up that there MOOSE-HOLE in the wall!"

"I did, Ma, but it's such an old hoose we got, there's moose-holes all about it!"

Well then, I was asking the girl at the museum about how the Newfoundlanders talk. So I gave her the same situation with the girls in the room, and asked what she would say to her friends. She laughed and said, in the musical Newfie accent, "What

are ye b'ys doing?"

"B'ys?" I asked, with eyes wide open. "Meaning BOYS?"

She laughed again and said, "Yes, B'YS!"

"Even if they're all girls?"

"Sure!"

"But a boy wouldn't walk into a room full of boys and ask, 'What are ye GIRLS doing?'"

“Not if he likeses havin’ all his teeth!” she said.

So we think of WOMAN as a special kind of MAN, and not MAN as a special kind of WOMAN. Wherever you go, that’s how it will be. It’s built into us. MAN is universal, meaning that it applies to everybody, and WOMAN isn’t, but WOMAN is special and MAN isn’t. For the WOMAN is special: her body is marked for the bearing and taking care of small children. Every little child sees a woman and thinks, “That’s somebody’s mother.”

In a lot of languages, the word for WOMAN refers to something about her body. That’s the case with the Latin word FEMINA, which is where we get the English word FEMININE from. It means, literally, that she nurses babies. The Latin word MULIER, meaning WIFE or grown woman, seems to be related to MOLLIS, SOFT, for the soft curves of her body. Then it would be a cousin of the English words MILD and MELT. When somebody MELTS, it means that his feelings grow soft and tender. Unless she’s the Wicked Witch of the West, in *The Wizard of Oz*. In that case she just melts, and there’s nothing left of her but her hat and her cape and her broomstick.

Our word WOMAN comes from the Old English word WIF (pronounced WEEF). WIF meant WOMAN, and that meaning still survives in some English words. A HOUSEWIFE is not a lady who is married to a house. She’s the woman who runs

the house. You may also have heard the word WIFE in a wedding ceremony, when the minister says, “I now pronounce you MAN and WIFE.” Here MAN is for the man only, and WIFE means WOMAN. The idea is that MAN and WOMAN are meant for one another, to be husband and wife. In a lot of languages, when a man says, “My WOMAN” he means “my WIFE,” and when a woman says, “My MAN,” she means “my HUSBAND.” That’s the way it is in Hebrew and German.

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Anyway, in English, the word WIFMAN came to replace WIF, if you were talking about one woman, and WIFMEN if you were talking about two or more. Say that last one again, this way: WEEVMEN. The F (pronounced as V) was lost, and that’s how we got our word WOMEN, pronounced WIMMEN. That’s how we’ve always said it. Saying WOMAN as WOO-man came later. Round your lips as you make a W sound. Aren’t you almost saying OO, right after? That is how we got WOOMAN for one woman, and that helps us to tell the difference between WOMAN and WOMEN. But we never changed the spelling. That’s English for you.



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