

Female or Woman?

Is a rose really a rose by any name?

Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms

female *n* **Female, woman, lady** are comparable when meaning a person and especially an adult who belongs to the sex that is the counterpart *of* the male sex. **Female** (the correlative *of male*) emphasizes the idea of sex; it applies not only to human beings but also to animals and plants. Its ordinary use as a synonym for *woman* was once frequent (three smart-looking *females*—*Austen*) (to please the *females of* our modest *age*—*Byron*) but this use is now felt as derogatory or contemptuous except in strictly scientific or statistical application, where the term may be employed to designate a person of the female sex whether infant, child, adolescent, or adult (the city's population included 12,115 males and 15,386 *females*). As compared with **woman** (the correlative *of man*), which emphasizes the essential qualities of the adult female, **lady** (the correlative *of gentleman*) connotes basically the added qualities implicit in gentle breeding, gracious nature, and cultivated background. *Woman* is preferred by many whenever the reference is to the person merely as a person (<the country expects the help of its *women*) (the following *women* assisted in receiving the guests) (a *woman of* culture) (a *saleswoman*) (*workingwomen*) (*society women*). *Lady*, on the other hand, is preferred when exalted social position or refinement and delicacy are definitely implied (<Alfonso XI at his death left one legitimate son. . . and five bastards by a *lady* of Seville, Dona Leonor de Guzman—*Altamira y Crevea*) (<Miss Nancy. . . had the essential attributes of a *lady*—high veracity, delicate honor in her dealings, deference to others, and refined personal habits—*George Eliot*) but *lady* may also be used informally as a mere courteous synonym for *woman* (<please allow these *ladies* to pass) (<the *ladies* were the decisive factor in rolling up the Republican landslide—*Priest*) (<may I speak to the *lady* of the house?) though its indiscriminate substitution for *woman* (as in wash *lady*, *saleslady*) carries courtesy into travesty (<from that hour to this, the *Gazette* has referred to all females as *women* except that police-court characters were always to be designated as *ladies*—*White*)

Webster's Dictionary of English Usage

Bolinger 1980 maintains that *female* in ordinary conversation is always derogatory. We can neither prove nor disprove the assertion.

Convenient in this function, *female* has continued to be used in reference to a group of women and girls or to those whose age is not readily apparent or is irrelevant—in short, in rather indefinite instances. This use can still be found, even in literature.

To sum up: the noun *female* had slow growth in literary use from the 14th to the 18th centuries; from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century it was commonly used in literature. In the middle of the 19th century it began to be disparaged, most likely because it was a popular word in newspapers, and not chiefly for the reason usually given—that it demeaned women by equating them with cows, sows, and mares. The censure continued well into the 20th century and has undoubtedly curtailed the word's use in written English, especially in the simple neutral use by which Jane Austen could refer to herself as a female or Fanny Burney could refer to the Princess Royal as "the second female in the kingdom." The facetious use is apparently still alive, as is the mildly pejorative use—this latter especially in ordinary conversation, according to Dwight Bolinger. The indefinite or indeterminate use—where age is unknown or irrelevant or where groups consist of mixed ages—appears to be the most common current use in writing, and it still is in good standing in literature.