

EXPLORING ‘CREATURE’ IN MODERNIST NOVELS²

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Abstract: *This research explores the perceptions and evaluations of the word ‘creature’ in British modernist prose fiction. A corpus-assisted analysis of its contextual meanings and adjectival modifiers in modernist novels revealed a predominantly anthropocentric understanding of this word and its prevailing negative evaluation. However, the assessment of ‘creature’ varies across four identified referential categories, and female-creatures are more positively evaluated in comparison with other entities. My interdisciplinary approach, employed in this study, combines linguistic examination with elements of literary analysis in the exploration of the meaning and evaluation of the word ‘creature’.*

Keywords: *corpus, creature, evaluation, meaning, modernist, novel*

1. Introduction

This study examines the meanings and evaluations of the word ‘creature’ in the corpus of modernist novels. While many immediately associate this word with Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*, and its infamous monster – abandoned by his creator and rejected by society – the word ‘creature’ transcends this popular image. Its rich history has shaped it into a widespread philosophical and religious notion, incorporating diverse readings and interpretations. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this word appeared in Middle English as a borrowing from French and now has 11 meanings, two of which are obsolete (OED). Such diversity of meanings challenges the image of a ‘creature’ as a monstrous being, while also posing difficulties in the identification of its specific referent, especially when this word is used in a generalised sense, denoting anything created.

My research pursues two primary objectives. First, it aims to study the entire spectrum of senses of the word ‘creature’ in the novels written by British modernist writers and to determine its prevalent interpretation in the corpus of texts. Second, it analyses the adjectival modifiers used to assess the conceptual meaning of ‘creature’, to establish the predominant type of its evaluation. Given the direct association of this word with the biblical conception of world creation and “the complex and variegated pattern of belief and disbelief” (Hobson 2011: 5), attributed to the modernist literary movement, the intersection of these two perspectives in modernist novels may provide unconventional insights into the interpretation of ‘creature’ in the context

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of modernity. The modernists' varied attitudes towards religion were studied by many (e.g., Lewis 2010; Bauduin and Johnsson 2018; Callison 2023, and others); however, there are no investigations of how 'creature' is interpreted and assessed in modernist novels. By exploring the linguistic dimensions of this word in the corpus of modernist prose fiction, my investigation blends literature and linguistic studies in the examination of this common philosophical and religious concept and fills the gap in the existing literature.

2. Literature review

The numerous senses of the word 'creature' in modern English have evolved from the multiplicity of its perception in the past. Historically, this word was widely used in philosophy and Judaeo-Christian texts, carrying a variety of meanings that reveal the complexity and heterogeneity of its conceptualisation.

In Plato's philosophy, for example, it is applied to the Cosmos or Universe viewed as "one single Living Creature", that contains "within itself all living creatures both mortal and immortal" (Plato 1981a: 179). This concept includes plants and animals, as well as humans, who are referred to as tame animals (Plato 1981b: 439). And for Aristotle, a 'creature' is a living being, either gregarious or solitary, whether "furnished with feet or wings," or "fitted for a life in the water," or "partake of both characters." Human beings are categorised by him as social creatures, along with "the bee, the wasp, the ant, and the crane" (Aristotle 2014: 776-777).

Philosophers succeeding Aristotle have generally perceived creatures as living beings, differentiating reasonable humans from animals. For instance, Eckhart "distinguishes between the irrational creatures and the rational or intellectual ones. While the first are produced according to the likeness of what is in God [...], the second are created in the image of God himself" (Beccarisi 2013: 105). In Locke's understanding, a human being is an intellectual creature, "capable of dominion", to whom God has granted the right to use "the inferior creatures, for the comfortable preservation of their beings" (Locke 1988: 205).

Later philosophical perspectives on 'creature' shifted to acknowledging humans as "one part of the creatures on earth", although being rational ones (Kant 2007: 231). Nietzsche (1996: 81) questioned humans' "inherited sense of being a higher type of creature with higher claims" that makes "a man fairly cold and leaves his conscience at rest", thus losing "all feeling of injustice when the difference between ourselves and other creatures is very great." Contemporary philosophers employ the word 'creature' to equate humans and animals, "since we human beings are also animals" (Korsgaard 2018: 3).

Religious and biblical understandings of the conceptual meaning of the word 'creature' are also numerous. It is broadly conceptualised as "the whole creation" (Easton 2015: 434; Hastings 2005: 165) and includes everything created by divine will: "living and moving creatures (animals and humans)" and "non-living (sun, moon, and stars)" (Harlow 2008: 178). Alternatively, the word 'creature' may be used to refer only to humans and animals as living creatures (Youngblood 2014: 2780).

Thus, the conceptual understanding of ‘creature’ varies across philosophical and biblical contexts, having an impact on its modern perception and categorisation. Diverse meanings of the word ‘creature’ in OED contrast general notions (e.g., creation) with specific ones (e.g., a person who owes his or her fortune and position and remains subservient to a patron); inanimate substances (e.g., a result, a product of something) with animate entities (e.g., a human being); and humans with animals (OED). Such varied interpretations of the word ‘creature’ highlight its conceptual ambiguity and the complexity of its understanding.

Studying the meanings of the word ‘creature’ in modernist novels may elucidate its comprehension in the age famous for its controversy, the dismissal of traditionality, and existential and spiritual pursuits. Modernist novels significantly differ from the prose fiction of their predecessors by their “reassessment of the relation between content and form” (Attridge 2023: 13); rejection of strong plots and “numerous realist techniques such as clear beginnings, heroic characters, dramatic events, overall meanings, and resolved endings” (Kern 2021: 58); aesthetic autonomy (North 2021: 27; Rutledge 2017: 3); “predominance of symbolism as conveyer of the novel’s central meaning” (Dekoven 1999: 176); language experiments (Attridge 2023: 13; Morley 2012: 152); search for the individual self (Levenson 2011: 4-5), and the ambivalent attitude to religion (Pinkerton 2017; Kern 2021).

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed a revival of scholarly interest in modernists’ spirituality, examining their religious beliefs and non-religious practices. Several researchers have reviewed and debunked the stereotypical myth of modernists’ secularisation. For instance, Lewis asserts that “the modernists did not accept secularization as inevitable or embrace a world emptied of the sacred. They sought instead to understand religious experience anew, in the light of their own experience of modernity and of the theories of their contemporaries” (Lewis 2010: 19).

Scholars acknowledge that religiosity was not a straightforward experience for modernists and involves a process of “religious change and a reconfiguration of the concept of the divine, but this does not necessarily result in a general loss of faith” (Bauduin and Johnsson 2018: 5). The significant advancements in scientific studies and philosophical thought in the 19th century had a profound influence on the societal religious beliefs and dogmas in that historical period, making many modernists seek “an uneasy compromise between science and religion, with the religious landscape becoming fragmented into forms of established religion and alternative religious movements” (Bauduin and Johnsson 2018: 5-6). Callison (2023: 12-13) claims that “the study of modernism and religion should be equated not with any one form of religion,” and the fascination with mysticism in that age coexisted with a “Christian ‘orthodoxy’”.

Summarising the scholars’ views on the relationship between modernists and religion, it can be concluded that the belief in supernatural power was never entirely absent in the age of modernity; instead, it transformed and adapted itself to the changing times. Religion still provided the underlying philosophical basis for many modernists’ beliefs and viewpoints, although having lost for many its public prominence and becoming a more personal and private matter. As Pinkerton (2017: 2) asserts, “God

remains very much alive” in modernist literature, since writers “continued to seek in scripture and theology the particular sources of meaning, affect, and literary force that only religion seemed fully capable of providing”. Other modernists turned to alternative practices, such as different forms of mysticism, in their quest for the spiritual self, seeing it as a substitute for institutional religion.

By exploring the meanings and evaluations of the word ‘creature’ in the corpus of modernist prose fiction, this study will hopefully provide deeper insights into its perception during that controversial and provocative literary period, contributing to the broader fields of linguistic and literary studies.

3. Methodology

To attain the stated objectives, the synergy of quantitative and qualitative methods has been employed in this research. The initial quantitative analysis of the occurrences of this word and its adjectival modifiers in the corpus texts provides a credible basis for this study, and the following qualitative examination of each instance of the word’s use allows specification of its contextual meanings and determination of the type of evaluation conveyed by its attributive and predicative adjectival collocates.

The corpus of 46 British modernist novels, available in the public domain on the sites *Project Gutenberg* and *The Modernist Literature Project* (McClure and Pager-McClymont 2022), was built with the assistance of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Staley 1985). The corpus encompasses diverse British modernist authors with their unique writing styles, spanning from the end of the 19th century to the mid-1930s in the 20th century (see Table 1).

Authors	Novels
Stella Benson	I Pose (1915); Living Alone (1919)
Joseph Conrad	Lord Jim (1900); Under Western Eyes (1911); The Rover (1923)
Ford Madox Ford	The Fifth Queen (1906-08); The Good Soldier (1915); A Man Could Stand Up (1926)
Edward Morgan Forster	Where Angels Fear to Tread (1905); A Room with a View (1908); Howards End (1910)
Aldous Huxley	Antic Hay (1923); Chrome Yellow (1921); Brave New World (1932)
James Joyce	Ulysses (1920); A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916)
Rudyard Kipling	The Light That Failed (1890); Captains Courageous (1896)
David Herbert Lawrence	The White Peacock (1911); Women in Love (1920); Aaron’s Rod (1922)
Richard Le Gallienne	The Romance of Zion Chapel (1898); Young Lives (1899); Pieces of Eight (1918)
Rose Macaulay	The Lee Shore (1912); Dangerous Ages (1921)
Arthur Machen	The Hill of Dreams (1907); The Terror: A Mystery (1917)
William Somerset Maugham	Mrs. Craddock (1902); The Bishops Apron (1906); Of Human Bondage (1915)

Hope Mirrlees	Madeleine: One of Love's Jansenists (1919); The Counterplot (1924); Lud-in-the-Mist (1926)
George Orwell	Down and Out in Paris and London (1933); Burmese Days (1934); Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936)
Dorothy Richardson	Pointed Roofs (1915); Deadlock: Pilgrimage (1921); Revolving Lights (1923)
May Sinclair	The Divine Fire (1904); The Helpmate (1907); The Combined Maze (1913)
Virginia Woolf	The Voyage Out (1915); Mrs Dalloway (1925); Orlando (1928)

Table 1. The corpus of British modernist authors

The web-based platform Sketch Engine (Kilgariff et al. 2014) facilitated the corpus compilation and further analysis of the lemma 'creature'. The advanced mode of Word Sketch generated a summary of all occurrences of the search word in the corpus texts, presenting its "grammatical and collocational behaviour" (idem: 9). The contextual senses of this word and its adjectival modifiers were analysed within the expanded concordance lines, which display the immediate context of the lemma's occurrence. In some instances, when the information in them was not enough, a broader context of a novel was regarded to ascertain the meaning of the word or the type of evaluation conveyed by its adjectival collocates.

The corpus-assisted analysis of the word 'creature' performed in the study allowed perceiving the larger picture of "trends, broad tendencies and repeated patterns across banks of language data" (Simpson 2014: 48). Specifically, through a semantic examination of the senses of the lemma 'creature' in the context of its usage, the whole spectrum of its meanings was revealed across the analysed modernist texts and classified according to the type of referent they denote. A conducted stylistic and pragmatic analyses of adjectival collocates of the word 'creature' showed the type of evaluation conveyed by them, either overtly or implicitly.

Following Hunston and Thompson (2000: 5), evaluation is understood in this research as "the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about". Leaving beyond the scope of my study the terminological inconsistency of this language phenomenon (see, for example, in Edo Marzá 2017: 101), I employ the term "evaluation" to designate positive, negative, or neutral attitudinal information conveyed by adjectival modifiers qualifying the word 'creature'. Axiologically neutral collocates describe 'creature's' objective physical attributes, such as colour, size, type, and others, and do not convey its positive or negative assessment, whereas axiologically positive or negative modifiers highlight attractive or unattractive features of the characterised entity, shaping good or poor opinions in its perception.

The comparative examination of research findings highlights correlations between various meanings of the studied word in the corpus texts and determines the prevalent type of its evaluation, indicating modernist authors attitudinal stance towards the conceptual meaning of 'creature'.

4. Results and discussion

In total, the word ‘creature’ appears 617 times in the analysed corpus of British modernist novels, with diverse meanings, which include references to *human creatures*, *nonhuman beings*, *inanimate things*, and *unspecified entities* (see Figure 1). References to *humans* were both gender-specific (females - 194 instances and males - 150 instances) and general ones, without gender indications (130 instances). *Nonhuman creatures* embrace animals (84 instances) and supernatural and religious beings (24 instances). *Inanimate objects* (21 instances) are often depicted as anthropomorphic beings, possessing human-like characteristics and feelings. *Unspecified entities* (14 instances) cover occurrences when the precise meaning of the word ‘creature’ and its referent could not be definitively ascertained in the context of its use, due to its lack of clear referential specificity, because the word is used with the general meaning of anything created by God.

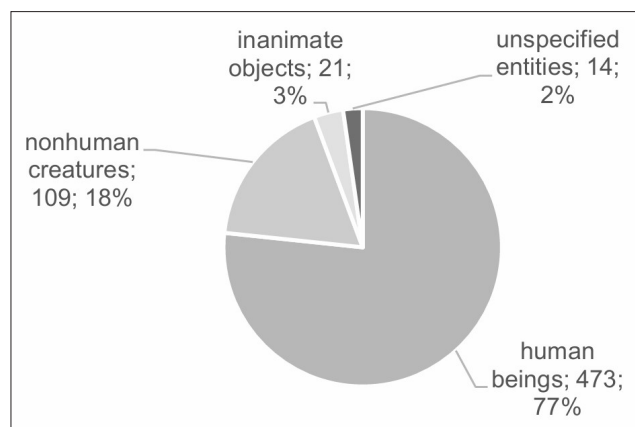


Figure 1. Referents of the word ‘creature’ in the British modernist corpus

As my research findings show, the word ‘creature’ in the corpus texts most commonly (77%) refers to human beings, very often denoting females (31%), followed by males (24%), and generalised human figures (21%). The prominence of a human-centric understanding of the word ‘creature’ in the analysed corpus can be attributed to modernists’ interest in the exploration of the human being. This includes rethinking human nature and existence in light of revolutionary advances in scientific and philosophical ideas, questioning the role of religion and religious institutions in individual lives, and a description of the complexity of human existence, caused by war and post-war societal changes. Smith (2019: 72) claims, that “the general loss of a stable sense of meaningfulness and humanity’s place in the universe pervades much modernist work of the interwar period.” Research findings confirm the modernists’ search for the essence of a human being and the reconceptualization of its place in the world.

The examination of adjectives collocating with ‘creature’ both attributively and predicatively in the corpus texts enabled the identification of 628 adjectival

modifiers, conveying various types of appraisal. In 164 occurrences, the word ‘creature’ was used without adjectives, modified by determiners and pronouns (e.g., *his creatures*, *a /the creature*, *all creatures*), and in 19 instances, it was part of a compound noun - ‘fellow creature’ (OED). Adjectival modifications of this word are versatile, sometimes employing two or more lexemes in its characterisation (e.g., *poor struggling creature*; *wild creature*, *nimble and fleet-footed*; *white, flabby, offensive, evil-smelling creatures*; *asinine, creaking*, ‘*what about your king and country*’, *shocked, outraged and speechless creature*).

Furthermore, 261 (42%) adjectival collocates of the word ‘creature’ appear only once in the corpus. Such a diverse range of adjectives used to evaluate the conceptual meaning of this word demonstrates the richness and variety of the language employed by the studied modernist novelists. Nonetheless, each evaluative adjective, whether appearing once or recurrently, contributed to a broad picture of predominantly negative assessment of ‘creature’ in the corpus (328 negative modifiers; 52%) (see Figure 2). Adjectival collocates conveying its positive assessment occur in 214 instances (34%), while axiologically neutral collocates are used 86 times (14%). To exemplify how ‘creature’ is appraised in the studied corpus of British modernist novels, I will elucidate its most common adjectival modifiers in each referential category.

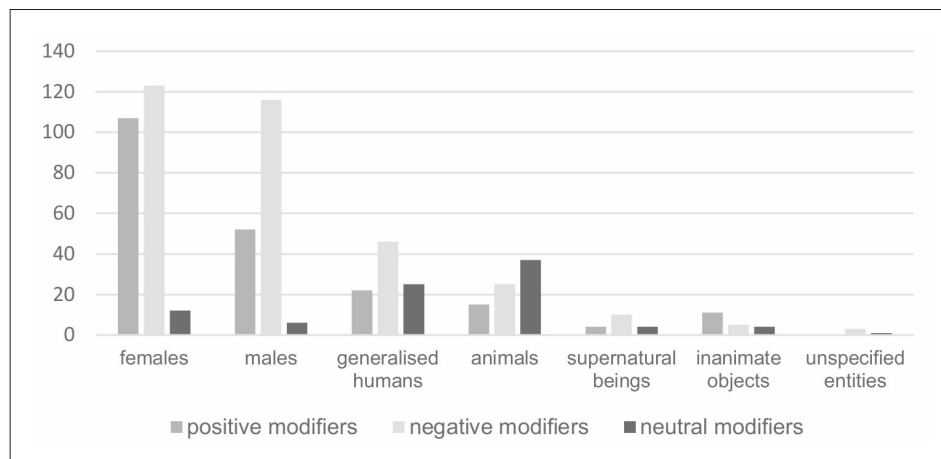


Figure 2. Evaluation of creatures in the British modernist corpus

The findings reveal the prevailing negative evaluation of human creatures (52%) in the analysed corpus of modernist novels. In the assessment of female creatures, the contrast between negative and positive adjectival appraisal is less pronounced, compared to males and humans in general, where negative evaluations occur nearly twice as frequently as positive ones. Neutral modifiers are rare in the assessment of females and males, but almost equal in number with positive adjectives in the evaluation of generalised human figures. These results suggest that the authors in the analysed corpus texts undervalue human creatures, which may stem from the modernists’ critical views of humanism and its principles.

Human creatures are often appraised in the analysed corpus texts as *poor* (38 adjectives), *little* (28 adjectives), *good* (15 adjectives), *old* (11 adjectives), *human* (8 adjectives), *small* (6 adjectives), *brilliant* (6 adjectives), *living* (6 adjectives), *strange* (5 adjectives), *mild* (5 adjectives).

The most frequently used modifier, *poor*, negatively assesses humans as “needy, necessitous, indigent, destitute” or “unfortunate, wretched, hapless” (OED). Even though this modifier may connote compassion and sympathy when applied to living beings, the way it is expressed, in my opinion, is condescending, implying that the characterised person is pitiable, vulnerable, or inferior, as in the following examples:

- (1) The rest of mankind that did not command the sixteen-knot steel steamer Ossa were rather poor creatures (Conrad, Lord Jim).
- (2) It was the clown’s doing, and the clown, poor creature, was non compos, not entirely there, and couldn’t be called to account for his actions (Huxley, Antic Hay).

The adjectives *human* and *living* are axiologically neutral in the corpus texts. They do not connote human beings’ inferiority to immortal divinities, as suggested in many religious narratives, but categorise beings as alive and belonging to the human race, as illustrated in (3) and (4).

- (3) I can’t imagine any living creature who would bowl over quite so easily (Forster, *Howards End*).
- (4) In fact she possessed, in a degree that amounted to genius, one of the rarest of human qualities, - unconditional pity for the unhappy human creature (Le Gallienne, *Young Lives*).

The modifiers *little* and *small* either objectively describe a creature’s size, build, or age (5) or subjectively assess beings as insignificant and petty, as demonstrated in example (6), where people are belittled in comparison with the vastness of the station.

- (5) But it did make his blood boil to see little creatures of five or six crossing Piccadilly alone (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*).
- (6) In the vast cavern of the station the theatre-goers were hastening, crossing the pale grey strand, small creatures scurrying hither and thither in the space beneath the lonely lamps (Lawrence, *The White Peacock*).

The modifiers *good* and *brilliant* evaluate human creatures positively, carrying approval or favourable attitude towards the characterised entity in their semantic meaning (7). Contrary to them, the modifier *strange* was mainly used to assess an individual as unfamiliar and abnormal, thus to be treated with caution (8). The modifier *old* is perceived as a negative one due to its associations with poorer health and decline, unlike young individuals (9). And the adjective *mild* conveys a negative evaluation of human creatures in all occurrences of its use in the corpus, especially when paired with other negative adjectives (10).

- (7) I think you're an amazingly brilliant creature, Guy—I do really (Mirrlees, *The Counterplot*).
- (8) Furex was a strange creature, a Limousin stonemason who worked steadily all the week and drank himself into a kind of paroxysm on Saturdays (Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*).
- (9) She was a dishevelled, jelly-soft old creature with a figure like a cottage loaf (Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*).
- (10) She was a pale, mild creature, and had been somewhat overwhelmed by her husband's greatness (Maugham, *The Bishops Apron*).

Among *non-human creatures* in the analysed corpus, animals are most commonly evaluated neutrally (37 modifiers), followed by negative modifiers (25), and positive ones, used the least (15 modifiers) (see Figure 4). Adjectives *little* (6 occurrences), *poor* and *wild* (5 occurrences each) are most frequent in the evaluation of animal creatures, mainly characterising them neutrally, as in example (11). Negative assessment is demonstrated in (12), where the modifier *poor* negatively and pitifully characterises a defenceless sick cat, violently kicked by a boy.

- (11) They were the eyes of some wild winged creature dashed down from its soaring and frenzied by the fall (Sinclair, *The Divine Fire*).
- (12) [...] he saw a large "healthy" boy kicking a sick cat; the poor creature had just strength enough to crawl under an outhouse door; probably to die in torments (Machen, *The Hill of Dreams*).

The *supernatural beings* are predominantly negatively evaluated (10 modifiers), compared to 5 positive adjectives and 4 neutral, like in (13), where goatish beings are negatively assessed because of their eerie appearance.

- (13) Goatish creatures with human faces, hornybrowed, lightly bearded and grey as indiarubber (Joyce, *Portrait of an Artist*).

Inanimate creatures in the corpus texts are cities and buildings, means of transportation, plants, natural phenomena, abstract notions, and other objects (21 instances), which are recurrently depicted as anthropomorphic beings, possessing human-like characteristics of liveliness, fidelity, distress, confusion, playfulness, attractiveness, and others. They are mostly positively assessed (11 modifiers), representing and praising humans' achievements, as in the assessment of a ship in (14), or they exemplify beautiful natural things, as sunflowers in (15).

- (14) [...] I felt, did the Maggie Darling, the loveliest, proud-sailed creature that ever leaned over and laughed in the grasp of the breeze (Le Gallienne, *Pieces of Eight*).
- (15) Wonderful creatures sunflowers are (Lawrence, *Aaron's Rod*).

Unspecified entities as creatures are often determined by definite/indefinite articles or other determiners (16), and have the least number of adjectival collocates (4 modifiers) in the corpus texts, like in (17), where Ursula dehumanises people like Loerke, comparing them to some undetermined living beings, something less than human.

- (16) It attacks the rats, and through them other creatures (Woolf, *The Voyage Out*).
- (17) But there were no new worlds, there were no more men, there were only creatures, little, ultimate creatures like Loerke (Lawrence, *Women in Love*).

In summary, as my research findings show, ‘creature’ is primarily understood as a human being in the corpus of British modernist novels. There is a wide diversity in its evaluations in the analysed novels, with a general tendency towards negative assessments. Positive appraisals of female-creatures do not significantly differ from their negative evaluations, unlike other referential categories, and animal-creatures are most commonly evaluated neutrally.

5. Conclusion

This study deals with the exploration of the word ‘creature’ in the corpus of British modernist novels. Specifically, it examines the contextual meanings of this word in the corpus texts and its evaluation. The research methodology combines established linguistic methods of corpus and stylistic analysis with elements of literary analysis.

The meaning of the word ‘creature’ is ambiguous in modern English, encompassing a spectrum of 11 meanings in the Oxford English Dictionary. Its semantic range contrasts general notions with specific ones, living beings with inanimate things, and humans with animals. Such multiplicity of its understanding can be traced back to the past, when this word was diversely perceived and interpreted in philosophical and religious contexts.

A publicly available corpus of 46 British modernist novels was built for the research, and the web-based platform Sketch Engine facilitated both its compilation and subsequent analysis of the word ‘creature’. The study of this term in the corpus texts revealed that it is employed in a variety of contexts and meanings, though references to human beings notably exceed those to other entities. This anthropocentric view on ‘creature’ may indicate the modernist authors’ interest in exploring the essence of human beings and rethinking humanity’s place in a rapidly changing world.

My stylistic and pragmatic analyses revealed the type of evaluation conveyed by its attributive and predicative adjectival collocates. The conceptual meaning of ‘creature’ is predominantly negatively assessed, although this general trend was not uniform: positive and negative appraisals of female creatures occur in roughly equal proportions, inanimate creatures are predominantly assessed positively, and animal creatures are most commonly evaluated neutrally.

The research findings reveal that despite the plurality of perceptions and evaluations of the word ‘creature’ in the corpus of British modernist novels, it is predominantly understood as a human being, and it is mostly negatively evaluated. Further investigations of this term in the literature of different literary periods may shed more light on its perception and evaluations across history and literary contexts.

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