

Prescriptive Poppycock Interlude: Singular *they*

The pronoun lexeme ***they***, much disapproved of by peddlers of prescriptive poppycock, has been used with syntactically singular antecedents for seven hundred years or more. The evidence is literally overwhelming.

*And whoso fyndeth hym out of swich blame,
They wol come up...* (Chaucer, *The Pardoner's Prologue*)

Every servant in their maysters lyverey...
(Lord Berners, translation of *Froissart's Chronicles*)

... every one prepared themselves.
(George Pettie, *A Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure*, 1576)

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And every one to rest themselves betake

(Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*)

*if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their
trespasses*

(*Matthew 18:35*, Authorized Version)

every fool can do as they're bid

(Jonathan Swift, *Polite Conversation*)

Every person ... now recovered their liberty.

(Oliver Goldsmith, *The History of England*)

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Nobody here seems to look into an author, ancient or modern, if they can avoid it. (Lord Byron, letter)

Who makes you their confidant? (Jane Austen, *Emma*)

Nobody fancies for a moment that they are reading anything beyond the pale. (Walter Bagehot, *Literary Studies*)

A person can't help their birth. (W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*)

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'Whoever lives there,' thought Alice, 'it'll never do to come upon them this size; why, I should frighten them out of their wits!'

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*)

'If everybody minded their own business,' the duchess said in a hoarse growl, 'the world would go round a deal faster than it does.'

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*)

at the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say

(Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's
The Importance of Being Earnest)

unless a person takes a deal of exercise, they may soon eat more than does them good (Herbert Spencer, *Autobiography*)

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*he could not bear to think that everybody might tramp in to it
when they chose*

(Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*)

Who ever thought of sparing their grandmother worry?

(Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*)

*Everyone in the building is in a constant process of evaluating
and criticizing their institution.*

(Roger Angell, *Holiday*, November 1953)

too hideous for anyone in their senses to buy

(W. H. Auden, *Encounter*)

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the detachment and sympathy of someone approaching their own death (Alan Moorehead, *The Blue Nile*)

Each designs to get sole possession of the treasure, but they only succeed in killing one another. (Sir Paul Harvey, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 4th. ed.)

We can only know an actual person by observing their behaviour in a variety of different situations.
(George Orwell, as quoted by Edward Cranshaw, *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 Dec. 1980)

I had to decide: Is this person being irrational or is he right? Of course, they were often right. (Robert Burchfield, in *U.S. News and World Report* 11 Aug. 1986)

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Mrs. Lynde says she always feels shocked when she hears of anyone ever having been naughty, no matter how small they were. (Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*)

When anybody occupies the room, they won't want all the wardrobe. (Anthony Trollope, *Ayala's Angel*)

So, then, when he ascended the platform to make his profession, everyone, as they recognized him, whispered his name one to the other, in tones of jubilation.
(*Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, translated and edited by Albert C. Outler)

it didn't enter anybody's head to trouble how they would live
(Joseph Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*)

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But it was Jonathan, and he was my husband, and we didn't know anybody who saw us, and we didn't care if they did, so on we walked.
(Bram Stoker, *Dracula*)

After all I pay as much as anybody else, and I suppose my money's as good as theirs.
(W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*)

everyone gave themselves up to the simple pleasures of the hour
(Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*)

you will frighten everybody so much that you can do anything you like with them afterwards
(Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*)

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The anxious few who struggle to avoid singular *they* are often guilty of grammatical monstrosities like this:

She and Louis had a game — who could find the ugliest photograph of himself (Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*)

the ideal that every boy and girl should be so equipped that he shall not be handicapped in his struggle for social progress
(C. C. Fries, *American English Grammar*)

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And a truly spectacular one:

everyone will be able to decide for himself whether or not to have an abortion
(Albert Bleumenthal, New York State Assembly)

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Why prescriptivists have taken aim at singular *they* isn't clear.

Clearly, part of what is involved must be a naive belief that (i) *they* is grammatically plural for purposes of verb agreement, and (ii) antecedents have to have the same grammatical number as the pronouns that are anaphorically linked to them, so (iii) it is illogical and ungrammatical for *they* to be anaphorically linked to anything that is syntactically singular.

But the evidence clearly shows that (ii) is false.

The critics of singular *they* are entirely wrong about what we find in the finest literature of the language they claim to defend.