



The Limitations of Rigid Gender Norms in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*

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Abstract

This essay examines the limitations of societal gender norms and expectations of the late nineteenth-century and how the fictional character Ántonia Shimerda adheres to and fails to conform to them. In nineteenth-century America men and women were divided into two different spheres. Women were expected to stay within the four walls of the home and take care of cooking, housekeeping and raising the family's children. The home was believed to be the only place where a woman could be truly happy. However, in the novel Ántonia proves that women can be happy performing physically demanding tasks outside of the expected sphere for women. To explore Ántonia's gender fluidity this essay focuses on gender expectations and norms in the historical setting of the novel and analyzes the reasons for her to abandon her gender and the consequences this has in her life. The representation of a character that both adheres to and fails to conform to the nineteenth-century gender perceptions indicates the performative nature of gender. Cather creates a fluid gender in Ántonia, who proves to be both an independent and strong character that clearly illustrates the limitations of rigid gender norms.

Key words

Gender, performative gender, rigid gender norms, nineteenth-century

Often remembered for her portrayals of pioneer life in the West, Willa Cather drew inspiration from her childhood Nebraskan pastures and created heroines inspired by her own memories of immigrant farmwomen in her Western prairie novels *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*. The customs and languages of the diverse immigrant population captivated Cather and she recalls in an interview how “their stories used to go round and round in my head at night” (O’Brien 469). As the following discussion demonstrates Cather turned to a male narrative point of view for the first time in *My Ántonia*. It is through Jim Burden that Ántonia Shimerda comes alive to the reader. It is also on Ántonia that this essay will concentrate. By focusing on gender roles and gender norms, this essay will examine how the narrator Jim portrays women, most specifically so Ántonia, and how she conforms to or differs from the expected gender norms and roles. The representation of a character that both adheres to and fails to conform to contemporary gender norms indicates the performative nature of gender. This discussion argues that the character Ántonia both adheres to and fails to conform to the accepted gender norms and roles of the nineteenth-century and that this illustrates the limitations of rigid gender norms in *My Ántonia*; it also considers why as well as the repercussions that follow by doing so.

Before defining gender norms and gender expectations in the time of the novel’s setting in the end of the nineteenth-century, the term gender should be defined. This will be done by using Judith Butler’s concept of gender in *Gender Trouble* and “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”. Butler argues that gender is culturally constructed, that it is not the same as biological sex, nor that it is a fixed attribute (8). Butler further argues that gender is constructed of bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds that “constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Performative Acts 519). Butler also states that since gender is socially constructed and not the result of the biological sex, *man* and *masculine* might just as easily indicate a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* refer to a male body as easily as a female one (9).

Butler brings up Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that woman is a historical idea and not a natural fact. Beauvoir famously claims that “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman” which points to that gender is not a stable identity but rather an identity created through a “stylized repetition of acts”. To be a woman she claims that one must adapt the body to conform to the historical idea of what it is to be “woman” (Performative Acts 519, 522). Both Butler and

Beauvoir's arguments are relevant in the discussion about *Ántonia's* situation because they both illustrate that when *Ántonia* fail to conform to societies accepted gender norms she fail to live up to culturally created expectations of what is appropriate for a woman to do and what is not. By knowing what was considered acceptable behavior for women in the novel's setting it becomes evident that contemporary gender norms were not only rigid but also limiting for women.

The accepted gender norms and ideals in the historical setting of fictional *My Ántonia* is based on traditional male and female gender roles. These have been used successfully through history to justify inequalities in a patriarchal society. These roles often cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive, while they cast women as emotional, nurturing, weak and submissive (Tyson 81). In 1966 historian Barbara Welter published a study based on an immense range of research on popular literature by both male and female writers. The study portrayed the image and ideals of the nineteenth-century American woman by means of four fundamental virtues. Welter called this idea "The Cult of True Womanhood" or "the cult of domesticity" and it emphasizes that womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Welter 1). Women's magazines, novels, advice books and religious literature among others presented these ideals; and to endorse the image of the cult, job opportunities for women outside of the home sphere were created by recruiting women to uphold the system that discriminated against their gender (Weagner 41). Susan Hill Lindley argues that the domesticity of the nineteenth-century was more than a division of labor between the sexes; the home was believed to be the only sphere where a woman could be truly happy (53). These were the accepted gender norms in the historical setting of the novel.

It has been almost a century since Willa Cather's most favored and best-reviewed literary work was published and since then many literary critics have analyzed and reviewed *My Ántonia*. According to Sharon O'Brien the initial reviews for the novel were glowing: the *New York Times Book Review* called the book "a carefully detailed picture rather than a story" and several other reviewers praised Cather for her "extraordinary reality" and admired her for surrendering "the usual methods of fiction in telling a story" (471, 472). O'Brien also states that reviewers connected the realism in Cather's work with her decision to truthfully tell "the foundational American story of immigration and pioneer renewal" which can be seen in *My Ántonia* and is one reason why the novel is as representative of its time as it is (472).

In Deborah G Lambert's "The Defeat of a Hero: Autonomy and Sexuality in *My Ántonia*" she argues that Cather has depicted Ántonia according to stereotypical patterns of dependency and sexuality. Lambert claims that Cather "stopped portraying strong and successful women and began to depict patriarchal institutions and predominantly male characters" after *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, and that *My Ántonia* was her transitional novel (680). She further states that the novel's female protagonist Ántonia is demoted to secondary status by the male narrator, which Cather's previous heroines were not. According to Lambert, Cather also depicts stereotypical patterns and behaviors for the first time in *My Ántonia*. She also argues that Cather and the narrator celebrate one of the most familiar stereotypes at the end of the novel where Ántonia is portrayed as a poor but happy mother of eleven, a stereotype she claims distorts and reduces the lives of women's individual identity, and where motherhood and nurturing promises false fulfillment (687). This paper, however, argues that Ántonia is portrayed to be a strong and successful woman who continuously disrupts stereotypical patterns in the novel.

In "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*" Blanche H. Gelfant argues that Ántonia brings Jim back in time through memory to happier days on the untouched prairie. Gelfant further discusses the differences between the country girls and the more refined American girls and brings to light how the young men in Black Hawk are allowed to play and dance with the hired girls but not to marry them. Gelfant also discusses Cather's inspiration for Ántonia, Annie a Bohemian hired girl of one of her neighbors, and how much of what Cather knew about Annie came from talks she had with young men about her. However, in the novel it is Lena Lingard who fascinates men, while Ántonia works alongside them in the fields. Gelfant further brings Ántonia's gender switching to light, and how this confuses the narrator in how she prides herself in her masculinity, which was unusual at this time in history.

Marilee Lindemann displays a similar point of view as Lambert in her essay "*It Ain't My Prairie*": Gender, Power, and Narrative in *My Ántonia*, as she is concerned with what is silenced and what is given a voice in the novel. Lindemann argues that the puzzling relationship between the novel's two main characters, Jim and Ántonia, is the reason for the central issues and arguments about desire and sexuality as well as the two characters

“unstable gender identities” (114). Lindemann further questions the problems of how women are perceived in a masculine culture; *Ántonia* is a character that is portrayed to continuously both adhere to and fail to conform to societal gender expectations of her time. When she does not conform to the acceptable gender norms by for instance doing chores “a girl ought not to do” the male farmhands joked about her “in a nasty way” which shows both the limitations of contemporary female gender norms as well as how a hard working girl was perceived in what Lindemann calls a masculine culture (Cather 121).

Dana Kinnison’s essay “Images of Possibility: Gender Identity in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*” states that the most memorable images in the novel are those of *Ántonia* showing her willingness and eagerness to work hard in the fields while wearing a man’s clothes and shoes. She further states the strength in how *Ántonia* often disregards the limitations that are put on women at the time of the novel’s setting, together with several other immigrant girls such as Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball. *Ántonia* is strong and opinionated but she is still aware of the cultural influences in her new country, which Kinnison states place greater value on men than on women. Kinnison further argues that the novel shows images of both male and female characters that do not follow strict gender perceptions, such as *Ántonia* but also Jim. *Ántonia* is proud of her strength and ability to work in the fields and helping her family and when she is warned that it makes her seem masculine she only flexes her muscles in response (205-206).

Lindemann also brings the work of Sharon O’Brien to light; in 1987 she wrote an influential feminist biography on Cather called *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. The biography identifies Cather as a lesbian writer, writing coded and covert stories of desire in her fiction. The publication of the biography opened up a new vast interpretive territory in Cather’s work and critics began searching for signs of disguised lesbianism in her work. It has been argued that *My Ántonia* is seen as both powerful and contradictory (O’Brien 21, 23). The main contradiction discussed is that of the novel’s complex and ambiguous narrative structure and some critics such as Judith Fetterley believe that the contradictions are closely connected to the fact that Cather was a lesbian writer (O’Brien 21). O’Brien’s biography together with the emergence of queer theory reintroduced *My Ántonia* to literary critics. However, contemporary critics (Dillman, Wilhite, Meeker) seem to focus on the motifs of landscape and journey in the novel, which show how rich Cather’s work is.

This paper will discuss stereotypes along with gender roles and norms in the nineteenth-century by focusing on these issues in the novel and analyzing how Jim depicts *Ántonia*. It will further analyze how the portrayals of her correlates to the contemporary accepted gender roles formerly described in the historical setting of the novel and how these show the limitations of rigid female gender norms.

As already established *My Ántonia* marks a change in narration for Cather. Cather changed from an omniscient point of view, which she previously used in both *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, to a male narrative point of view through the writing of Jim Burden. Lambert explains this transition with the argument that it is natural for a woman to see the world and other women from the dominant male perspective since that is what the majority of literature reflects (680). *My Ántonia*, however, is a novel filled with strong and colorful female characters that are seen and told about from a male point of view. It is also clear in the introduction of *My Ántonia* that it is Jim's version of *Ántonia* that is being told, which is important to know. By having a male narrator Cather clearly illustrates how rigid many men's view of women were at this time. Jim demonstrates this by not supporting *Ántonia*'s decision to "work out doors [rather] than in a house" which was the appropriate sphere for women (Cather 129). He does not support her even though he is aware of that this would help her family stay alive.

It is evident what behavior is considered appropriate and what is not for a young woman through the eyes of the novel's male narrator Jim. It is also important to recognize that the ideals of True Womanhood were created for women in the American middleclass; and the Shimerdas were poor Catholic immigrants. However, Jim, Mrs. Burden and the rest of Black Hawk expect the same behavior from the hard working country girls as they do from the American girls, even though their circumstances are entirely different. In *You Have Stept out of Your Place* Hill Lindley states that the ideals of True Womanhood did influence underprivileged Catholic immigrants as well, however, it was almost impossible for the majority of them to abide by these ideals since they lacked the financial means to enjoy full-time domesticity. To help their families survive most immigrant women had to work outside of the home. Hill Lindley further explains that single women had more freedom and were expected to work for pay, often as domestic servants as *Ántonia* does in Black Hawk, to help

support the family (207). However, working in the fields and herding cattle were not amongst the expected work for a nineteenth-century woman. This is one reason to why *Ántonia* and the other country girls receive critical comments from the neighboring farmers about their strength and work prior to moving to town.

Throughout the novel the fictional *Ántonia* Shimerda both adheres to and fails to conform to the expected gender roles for women at the time the novel takes place. She literally steps into her father's old shoes and shows both physical and mental strength in providing for her family. Her physical strength is visible through her hard work in the fields starting at a very young age and continuing through pregnancies and old age. Her mental strength is visible in her hard work as well since *Ántonia* is determined to help her family survive in the new country and the only way for them to do so is by her working alongside her brothers in the fields. Furthermore her mental strength is also visible when she returns pregnant and disgraced from Denver after being left by Larry Donovan, as she continues with the chores and hard work on the farm without complaining or even showing signs of being pregnant. *Ántonia* is never ashamed of her illegitimate daughter and tells Jim that she would have never married her husband Anton if he had forced her to give Martha up. The ideal woman of the nineteenth-century was not supposed to be independent like the fictional character *Ántonia* is in the novel, but submissive which further shows the character's mental strength.

In "Performative Acts" Butler argues that since gender is a performance, it is only real to the extent it is performed. This means that certain acts are interpreted as belonging to a certain sex or gender norm and these acts then conform or contest their expected gender identities (527). To a certain degree gender is also the distinction of appearance, and when *Ántonia* dresses in male clothes instead of typical female clothes she is considered failing to conform to the female gender. As a teenager Jim describes her in the novel coming home from the fields wearing "the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself and his old fur cap. Her outgrown cotton dress switched about her calves, over the boot-tops. She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's" (Cather 117). *Ántonia* merges typical clothing from both genders during her hours in the fields. A young girl wearing a dress with the sleeves rolled up, together with a man's boots and fur cap. Comparing *Ántonia*'s tan arms and neck to those of a sailor's is a way for the

narrator to further masculinize her, by contrasting her to something stereotypically male. However, there is an underlying motivation for *Ántonia's* fluid gender in the novel.

After Mr. Shimerda's death *Ántonia* is determined to help her remaining family create a thriving farm on their rough Nebraskan land. She no longer has the time for reading lessons from Jim as she did when the Shimerdas initially arrived in Nebraska, but instead works hard on the farm with her brothers. She turns down the opportunity for education to help create a better life for her younger sister. When *Ántonia* proudly states "I can work like mans now" she says it knowing that it is not expected that a fifteen-year-old girl is physically strong enough or expected to work in the fields (Cather 118). When she starts working in the fields *Ántonia* certainly goes against the norms of what is expected by a woman and the Burden family does not wait long with their reactions.

Jim's displeasure with *Ántonia's* new masculine traits is clear. He disapproves with the way she behaves at the dinner table: "*Ántonia* ate so noisily now, like a man", and complains of their conversation topics: "Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength" (Cather 120-21). Jim's comments about *Ántonia* show how limiting female gender norms were in the historical setting of the novel. When *Ántonia* behaves outside of what is socially accepted Jim becomes upset with her. However, while Jim complains and feels as if *Ántonia* is growing up and abandoning him for chores in the fields, his grandfather expresses how pleased he is with her and how he believes that *Ántonia* one day will help a man get ahead in the world thanks to her determination.

Jim's grandmother on the other hand is worried that the hard fieldwork will spoil *Ántonia*, and that "she'll lose all her nice ways and get rough ones" to which the narrator responds that she already has (Cather 120). One motive to why Mrs. Burden reacts so strongly against *Ántonia* working in the fields could be that as mentioned previously the home was virtually the only sphere appropriate for a nineteenth-century woman and it was also believed that it was the only place in which a woman could find real happiness according to Hill Lindley (53). It is made clear by both Mrs. Burden and Hill Lindley that a woman belongs inside the four walls of the home.

Even after the Burdens employ *Ántonia* to help them in the kitchen during the wheat reaping, she proves that she is more content when not conforming to her expected gender role: “Oh, better I like to work out of doors than in a house!” she used to sing joyfully. “I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man.” (Cather 129). *Ántonia* does not only desert the virtue of domesticity as described by Welter, but she also states that she likes to be and act like a man, which is not acceptable for a woman at this time in history. Once again the limitations of rigid gender norms becomes apparent in the novel. After this instance even *Ántonia*’s name changes gender as Jim more occasionally starts calling *Ántonia* by her masculine nickname Tony.

Ántonia claims that she likes to “be like a man”, however, she is also portrayed acting according to female gender norms throughout the book. An early instance of this is when Jim talks about *Ántonia*’s caring and protective side:

Much as I liked *Ántonia*, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. She was four years older than I, to be sure, and had seen more of the world; but I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner. Before the autumn was over she began to treat me more like an equal and to defer to me in other things than reading lessons. This change came about from an adventure we had together. (Cather 63)

Even though *Ántonia* embodies the female gender role in this passage by being caring and protective of someone who is younger, it is not portrayed positively in this particular context because Jim feels that he is being patronized. *Ántonia* might be both older and far worldlier than Jim, but after all he is a boy and being protective is seen as a masculine trait according to Tyson. According to Lambert this instance shows Jim’s need to downgrade *Ántonia* to secondary status to receive respect. Hill Lindley also states that women have always been subordinate to men in Western tradition, and in America the traditional hierarchies of the Puritans influenced this particular societal view, which explains Jim’s need to demote *Ántonia* (53). When Jim mentions the adventure that made *Ántonia* treat him more as an equal, Jim refers to the mock adventure when he kills a five-and-a-half foot long rattlesnake. He believes that *Ántonia* likes him better after he kills the big snake, and that she now respects him and sees him as “a big fellow” (Cather 67).

However, Lambert argues that the two enact in a nearly ironic ritual of male and female behavior: “in his fear, he turns to her in anger; she cries and apologizes for her screams, despite the fact that they may have saved his life; and she ultimately placates him with flattery” (685). After they return home with the snake Jim realizes that the adventure was a mock, the game was fixed “as for many a dragon-slayer” (Cather 67). He had been adequately armed, the snake was old, and he “had *Ántonia* beside [him], to appreciate and admire” (Cather 67). Crucea claims that it was believed that women in the nineteenth-century needed a man to protect them due to their “emotional and physical frailty” which also explains Jim’s need to have *Ántonia* around him, so that he could prove to her that he could act as a big fellow and could protect her (189).

Mrs. Burden’s concern for *Ántonia* becomes more evident after she finds out that *Ántonia*’s brother Ambrosch “hired his sister out like a man” all through the wheat season, having her go from farm to farm to work (Cather 137). He is proud of his sister’s strength and seems to be the only one who appreciates her masculine traits since they help their family profit more and stay alive. Mrs. Burden helps her acquire a job in Black Hawk with their neighbors and that way saves *Ántonia* from months of husking corn for the neighboring farms and from being further spoiled by the hard life she has led according to the narrator. Ambrosch does not want the Harlings “to take his sister to town and dress her up and make a fool of her”; he simply does not seem to want to accept that *Ántonia* is going to adhere to the social expectations of gender in town because once *Ántonia* moves to Black Hawk her feminine side becomes more distinct (Cather 141).

Once *Ántonia* arrives in Black Hawk the first thing she does is to tell Jim’s grandmother that “maybe I be the kind of girl you like better, now I come to town” (Cather 143). What Welter call the Cult of True Womanhood might have been directed towards women of the middle class but as stated previously Hill Lindley argues that it also influenced women of lower standing, such as Cather’s fictional character *Ántonia*. It shows in this passage that she is portrayed as eager to make Mrs. Burden proud of her in the domestic sphere in town. As a hired girl *Ántonia* falls more into the ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood, as her domestic side becomes more evident; she cooks and bakes with joy, sews clothes for herself and plays with the children in the house between chores, as demonstrated in the quotation below which makes the narrator jealous:

[n]othing that Charley wanted was too much trouble for her. She loved to put up lunches for him when he went hunting, to mend his ball-gloves and sew buttons on his shooting-coat, baked the kind of nut-cake he liked, and fed his setter dog when he was away on trips with his father (Cather 143).

As compared to earlier, *Ántonia* is now portrayed as enjoying the private sphere of domesticity, and is eager to assist with anything she can especially if it is for Charley. It is clear that when *Ántonia* arrives in Black Hawk she is no longer resentful or competitive as before, but abandons all of her personal goals in pursuit of serving others (Lambert 685). The narrator describes what he calls harmony between Mrs. Harling and *Ántonia* in the novel where it becomes further evident that she has become highly influenced by the ideals of the cult of domesticity from living in Black Hawk: “They loved children and animals and music, and rough play and digging in the earth. They liked to prepare rich, hearty food and to see people eat it; to make up soft white beds and to see youngsters asleep in them“ (Cather 160). As one of the four virtues of the Cult of True Womanhood, domesticity was far more than a division of labor according to Hill Lindley. Jim points to the similarities between Mrs. Harling and *Ántonia*, who previously in the novel detested the domestic sphere and working indoors. Now, however, just like Mrs. Harling, a true woman in the novel *Ántonia* genuinely enjoys the private sphere of cooking and housework. Cather’s representation of *Ántonia* clearly changes when she moves to Black Hawk. She goes from a young girl who enjoys working outdoors and running through the fields to a young woman whose greatest pleasures now include something as simple as sewing a button onto a coat.

The Harling family and *Ántonia*’s domestic harmony do not last as *Ántonia* grows into a beautiful adolescent woman as “the summer which was to change everything was coming nearer every day” (Cather 169). Lambert argues that the second part of *My Ántonia* “dramatizes the emergence of *Ántonia*’s intense sexuality and its catastrophic effects on her world” (686). Her success in the dancing pavilion comes with consequences. It affects her work to the point that her friends have to come and help her. Another consequence was that the Black Hawk men now lingered around the Harlings house inviting her to parties and picnics instead of doing their jobs and letting her do hers. Mr. Harling finally gives *Ántonia* an ultimatum: to either give up the dances where he believes that she attracts too much

attention or to give up the job in his house. When she refuses to give them up, he banishes her from his family. The catastrophic effects continue as she becomes the object of her new employer's lust and due to that loses Jim's affection and friendship, which possibly explains the narrative distance to *Ántonia* in the following chapters of the novel.

Under the title "The Hired Girls" in the novel, Cather dedicates a whole chapter to explain the social situation between immigrants and Americans in Black Hawk. In this chapter Cather specifically points to the determination of the country girls and how hard they worked to help their family out of debt and to create a better life for their younger siblings. In their early teens they all worked in the supposedly male sphere outdoors helping their families herd cattle and work in the fields.

Further in this chapter of the novel the narrator points out that the immigrants and Americans came to Nebraska alike, with equally little capital and knowledge about the land. The only difference was that the immigrant families had their daughters to help clear them from debt while the American families did not let their daughters work outside of the home unless they could teach in a country school. Hill Lindley supports Cather's information as she states that immigrant women often had to work either outside of the home, or bring work into it, to help their family survive in America, which is what the fictional *Ántonia* does in the novel when she goes to Black Hawk (206-207).

The essay thus far demonstrates that fictional *Ántonia* takes on what is considered male gender norms as well as female gender norms in the novel. *Ántonia* acts more typically male after her father's death because she is aware of the situation her family is in, and tries to make Jim understand this as well when she says: "[m]y mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him" (Cather 118). Cather created a character who is aware of her family's difficult situation and her responsibility to help them survive in their new country; this is one reason why she takes on a fluid gender role and enters the predominantly male labor sphere.

In the following chapters of the novel Jim holds a narrative distance to *Ántonia*, as previously mentioned. Jim finds out about what has happened in *Ántonia*'s life: her affair with Donovan, her pregnancy, her return from Denver and the birth of her daughter Martha from a neighbor.

It is also when she returns home that *Ántonia* again steps into her father's old shoes and resumes a more masculine gender role. Butler states that by expressing the distinction between sex and gender it challenges the distinction between appearances and reality which structures how people think about gender identity (527). So when *Ántonia* resumes a more masculine gender role it implies that she has given up on trying to conform to society's feminine gender norms.

Ántonia's physical and mental strength is again evident in the novel, which Jim first acknowledges when he returns to Black Hawk and finds a photograph of *Ántonia*'s illegitimate daughter on exhibition at the town's photographer. He states that another girl would "have kept her baby out of sight" but not *Ántonia* (Cather 243). By exhibiting the photograph in a great gilt frame at the photographer's *Ántonia* shows her mental strength and how proud she is over her daughter, where other women would hide the fact that they bore an unlawful child according to the narrator. Jim turns to Widow Steavens for the story of what happened to *Ántonia* after she left to get married to Larry Donovan in Denver and what happened after she returned disgraced. Mrs. Steavens tells Jim: "[a]ll that spring and summer she did the work of a man on the farm" and she further says that they never saw any of "Tony's pretty dresses"(Cather 250). *Ántonia* returns to her home and falls back into the patterns of hard labor in the fields, in the same way as before she began working as a hired girl in town, and discards the feminine clothes she sewed and made for herself.

Further Mrs. Steavens tells Jim that after the winter begun, *Ántonia* "wore a man's overcoat and boots, and a man's felt hat with a wide brim" (Cather 251). After being abandoned by her lover in Denver, *Ántonia* now hides her beauty under her father's old clothes while herding the family's cattle. While physically looking and acting like a man *Ántonia* carries the most female secret under her male clothes, a child, which she gave birth to alone without asking for help. This further affirms both *Ántonia*'s physical and mental strength. By bearing an illegitimate child *Ántonia* breaks two out of the four cardinal rules of what Welter calls the Cult of True Womanhood, those of piety and purity. She did this while also fulfilling the most female performances of them all: motherhood. Hill Lindley states that for women in nineteenth-century America motherhood was an extremely important task due to social and economic changes as men began to leave the home and the farm for work. Cruea also argues that motherhood was seen and valued as the "most fulfilling and essential" of all duties

women had in the nineteenth-century (188). Hill Lindley further states that one of the important tasks of motherhood for the true woman of the nineteenth-century was to raise intelligent and righteous children who would grow up ready to take on society's "gender-defined roles" (54-55). This is something *Ántonia* is portrayed to struggle with as a teenager since she both adheres to as well as fails to conform to the accepted gender roles of the time.

When *Ántonia* and Jim finally reunite after two years apart Jim describes her: "[s]he was thinner than I had ever seen her, and looked, as Mrs. Steavens said, "worked down," but there was a new kind of strength in the gravity of her face, and her color still gave her that look of deep-seated health and ardor" (Cather 254). As mentioned previously Gelfant states that the men of Black Hawk were permitted "to kiss [the girls] behind [the] bushes and – run", which is similar to what Donovan does to *Ántonia*, except for the added promise of marriage (68). They are allowed a passing fling with the country girls, but never more than that. However, even after the humiliation of the broken promise of marriage in Denver and her pregnancy, Jim describes *Ántonia* as healthy and content after what she has gone through. Her only focus now is on giving her daughter a better start in life than she had.

Throughout the novel *Ántonia* is punished for how she acts and behaves, both when she conducts herself according to female gender norms and when she fails to conform to the expected gender norms and acts more masculine. Butler argues that what is considered gender identity is a performative accomplishment ruled by social sanctions and taboo and further states in "Performative Acts" that those individuals who fail to act according to their gender are often punished for it (520, 528). These punishments can be both apparent and indirect and she further states that when performing one's gender according to the expected norms there is a provided reassurance of gender identity (528). In *Ántonia*'s case, however, she is punished in the novel both when she adheres to and fails to conform to her gender.

Butler further states that another form of punishment is that of being marginalized by society for failing to obey "the illusion of gender essentialism" (528). This partly happens in the novel to both *Ántonia* and the rest of the country girls. They are described as "physically ... almost a race apart" from the American girls because of the time they spent working outside in the male sphere of the fields using their bodies and gaining muscles from the work they did (Cather 172). As previously established men and women were separated by their gender in the

nineteenth-century and a woman's place was considered to be within the four walls of the home. *Ántonia* and the other country girls become marginalized by society for working hard in the fields, which again shows the limitations of the contemporary gender norms.

The forms of punishment *Ántonia* receives when she fails to conform to contemporary gender norms consists mainly of judgmental comments and attempts to make her change back into her expected gender role again. In the novel Jim states that several farmers around Black Hawk “joked in a nasty way” about *Ántonia*'s masculine work ethic and strength in the fields after Ambrosch had her do work “a girl ought not to do” (Cather 121). Ambrosch is also the only character in the novel that does not judge *Ántonia* for her fluid gender and partially male behavior. This is possibly because he knows that their family depends on *Ántonia*'s help in their own fields, but also as help that can be rented out to other farmhand when they need it, which further helps their family survive. The narrator also states that even though they make jokes about *Ántonia*'s masculine features the farmers would much rather hire *Ántonia* than her brother. *Ántonia* has received this type of punishment since childhood by comments from the narrator Jim as well, who has a clear opinion of her and her ways of abandoning her expected gender role. An instance of this is the previously mentioned snake-killing incident where Jim detests *Ántonia*'s protective manner and superior voice because “I [Jim] was a boy and she was a girl” (Cather 63). Jim's punishments of *Ántonia*'s gender abandonment are indirect, he never actually tells her how he feels about it, but acts as though he is upset with her.

While working for the Harlings in Black Hawk *Ántonia* adheres to society's expected gender norms by cooking, cleaning and taking care of the family's children. Even though her domestic performances are well perceived by the other characters she is still punished for her femininity and for her short pleasures of courtship at the dances she attends. *Ántonia* is punished for gaining too much attention by having to choose between the work she loves and the dances where she enjoys herself. According to Gelfant her punishment for her brief courtship by Donovan is that of “thoroughgoing masculinization” (72). She returns home in shame and once again does the work of a man on the farm while wearing a man's jacket and boots. *Ántonia* gets punished for not being able to conform to contemporary gender norms and she gets punished for adhering to them as well. Ironically her punishment for adhering to her gender and her sexuality is that of absolute masculinization after she returns to her

family's farm, which illustrates how inadequate and limiting the contemporary gender norms were. Butler states that if the various ways in which a body shows its cultural significance such as gender attributes and acts are performative, then there is no preexisting identity to which an act or attribute might be measured (528). This means that gender can neither be true nor false. Yet Butler argues that, "one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers" (528).

After Jim's visit it would take another twenty years before he and *Ántonia* would see each other again when he returned to Nebraska. The narrator states that he was afraid to return after hearing from Tiny Soderball that *Ántonia* had not "done very well" and had "had a hard life" (Cather 259). When he returns, *Ántonia* is married with plenty of children living on a farm of their own in Nebraska. Her family is neither rich nor poor and just as Tiny said they have worked hard to achieve a good life on the farm (264-265).

In a conversation between Jim and *Ántonia* she tells him that her husband knew very little about farming when they got married and often got discouraged in the beginning. She further tells Jim that "[w]e'd never have got through if I hadn't been so strong. ... I was able to help him in the fields until right up to the time before my babies came" (Cather 268). Once again *Ántonia* shows her strength and determination by incorporating both the stereotypically female, such as childbearing with the male tough laboring in the fields. In this passage *Ántonia* also recognizes her own strength and proves that Jim's grandfather was right in stating that "[s]he will help some fellow get ahead in the world" (Cather 121). *Ántonia*'s determination to help her brothers work in the fields as well as her competitiveness in wanting to be the best and the strongest as a teenager has now helped her and her husband Anton Cuzak to develop a thriving farm with strong children who are willing to help with the work on the farm to ease the load off their parents.

The rumors Jim heard from Tiny about how *Ántonia* has lived a hard life is confirmed once the two meet again. Jim describes her as a woman who is now "battered but not diminished" from hard work in the fields and childbearing (Cather 264). As the two talk *Ántonia* says that "I feel just as young as I used to, and I can do as much work", proving that even after twenty years of hard work she is still capable of working just as hard and as much because she still feels young (Cather 264). However, Jim also states "I know so many women who have kept

all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life” (Cather 264). This fire of life is also what makes *Ántonia* so special to Jim as well as a reason why he celebrates her as the “archetypal mother” according to Lambert, who further states that *Ántonia* now signifies growth, abundance, fertility and nourishment both regarding her children and the land (689).

With determination and strength *Ántonia* has been able to overcome the hardships of her early life in America and is now portrayed in the novel as the bearer of life. She is not only a mother but her “rich mine of life” have also been able to transform the barren Nebraska prairie into a lush and fruitful garden on their farm and she tells Jim “[t]here ain’t one of our neighbors has an orchard that bears like ours” (Cather 274, 267). It is clear that when *Ántonia* combines her female nurturing and caring side with her male hardworking and determined side she becomes the ultimate woman. Cather’s representation of *Ántonia* has once again changed in the final chapters of the novel. *Ántonia* now represents both the feminine and the masculine and she no longer tries to adhere to society’s rigid gender norms. She is happy in her gender fluidity and her combination of the feminine warmth and masculine work ethic is what has made their farm as fruitful as it is.

Not only does *Ántonia* combine the feminine and masculine to achieve greatness on the farm, but she is also happy with her life there and towards the end of the novel she tells Jim “I don’t mind work a bit, if I don’t have to put up with sadness” when she explains to him that she is much happier on the countryside than she ever was living in town (Cather 268). However she is still grateful for her time as a domestic servant at the Harlings as she learned “nice ways” there and states that she would not have known anything about cooking or housekeeping if she had stayed at home on the family farm (Cather 269).

The limitations of time and space for the present essay have affected the choices and the number of characters analyzed. There are several other characters in the novel that could be included and analyzed such as Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball. Just as *Ántonia* both Lena and Tiny worked hard to help their families growing up in their new country and combined the female and male as well. The two women both refrained from marriage and children due to their hardships early on in life and instead focused on their businesses. Towards the end of the novel it can be argued that Cather undermines Tiny and Lena’s achievements and

independence in life as she consequently portrays them as stereotypical old maids according to Lambert (688). Another interesting aspect to add in a future analysis would be that of the male characters in the novel. The female characters are not alone in adapting traits from the opposite sex; the male characters do it as well. There are several instances in the novel where Jim as well as other male characters acts according to contemporary female gender norms.

Another interesting future study would be to include and alternatively compare *Ántonia* to the female characters Alexandra and Thea from Cather's earlier novels *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*. Critics argue that Alexandra and Thea are female heroes, women who are not "defined by their relationship to men, or children, but by commitment to their own destinies and to their own sense of themselves" (Lambert 679). As previously mentioned Lambert argues in her essay that *My Ántonia* is Cather's transitional novel away from strong and successful female characters. In this paper however, it is evident that *Ántonia* is still an independent, strong and successful woman at the end of the novel, even if she is portrayed to not always conform to what was considered acceptable.

This discussion shows that throughout the novel *Ántonia* both adheres to and abandons female gender norms for male ones. She changes her behavior, her work sphere, and even her name is altered when she switches between female and male. *Ántonia* further proves in the novel that a woman can be happy while performing physically demanding tasks in the fields instead of following what today is referred to as the cult of domesticity and remain within the appropriate female sphere of the home.

As a fifteen-year-old girl it is the responsibility she feels towards her family and their future survival in the new country that makes fictional *Ántonia* put her deceased father's boots on her feet and enter the male sphere by helping her brothers work in the fields. She shows physical strength in her hard work and endurance from a young age through pregnancies and childbirths and mental strength in her determination and the difficulties she withstands in her life: arriving in a new country, the loss of her beloved father and the disgrace of an illegitimate child.

Ántonia is portrayed as a girl who does not let anything stop her from selflessly helping her family survive in Nebraska. She is also a character that seems aware of the fact that she fails

to conform to society's expectations at times and handles the consequences of this with pride and humor, which further proves her strength. It is evident in the novel that contemporary gender norms were not only rigid but also very limiting for women. By both adhering to and failing to conform to the acceptable gender perceptions of the nineteenth-century, the fictional character *Ántonia* illustrates the limitations of rigid gender norms.

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