Spineless Men and Irrepressible Women?

Gender Norm Destabilizing Performances in *The Scarlet Letter* and *My Ántonia*

Sandra Johansson
Abstract

Both *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather depict characters that perform non-traditional gender roles. In these novels, there are expectations about how women and men should act. The purpose of this comparative study is to look at how the female and male protagonists’ actions correspond to, or differ from, these expectations and if they do so in similar ways. The analytical approach is based on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance. This study also examines in what ways the characters’ actions conflict with, or conform to, social norms of the time by investigating the social expectations for women in the Puritan society and in the late nineteenth century. Even though the settings are separated by two hundred years, this study shows that the protagonists challenge traditional gender role norms in similar ways and that both female protagonists show a feminist desire to exist outside the binary understanding of gender.

**Keywords:** Gender performances, gender role norms, expectations, masculinization, feminization, feminism
# Table of Contents

1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 5

2 The Characters’ Gender Performances ......................................................................... 7
   2.1 Gender Performativity ............................................................................................. 7
   2.2 Gender Norm Destabilization in *My Ántonia* .................................................... 8
   2.3 Gender Norm Destabilization in *The Scarlet Letter* ........................................... 16
   2.4 Comparison of Gender Performances in the Two Novels ..................................... 22

3 Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 26

4 Works Cited ................................................................................................................ 28
1 Introduction

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne and My Ántonia by Willa Cather are two very popular novels that have been scrutinized by many students and scholars. While these novels might seem quite different, they have many things in common; such as themes, narrative aspects and non-traditional gender roles. This essay focuses on the latter similarity. The Scarlet Letter, published in 1850, tells the story of Hester Prynne, a married woman in Puritan New England who gives birth to a child outside of marriage and refuses to name the baby’s father. The reader learns that Arthur Dimmesdale, a young and popular minister, is the father. He tries to hide his sinfulness while Hester is condemned to live her life as an outcast. My Ántonia, published in 1918, is about the Bohemian girl Ántonia Shimerda who grows up on the prairie in Nebraska in the 1880s. Her story is narrated by Jim Burden, the novel’s male protagonist. Even though The Scarlet Letter is set in the seventeenth century and My Ántonia is set in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the protagonists share many characteristics: many of the female characters are portrayed as strong, independent, irrepressible and masculinized while the male protagonists are portrayed as weak, feminized and even spineless. In the settings of these novels, there are assumptions and expectations about how women and men should act. The purpose of this study is to look at how the characters’ actions correspond to, or differ from, these expectations. The main focus is on examining how gender functions and how gender roles are perceived for the female protagonists, but the male protagonists’ actions will also be analyzed.

For my theoretical approach I will use Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance, which will be used to examine the performances of the main characters. In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Butler claims that gender is a performance, which means that gender is not what a person is, it is what that person does. She also claims that society has a desire to keep genders binary; an idea that will be discussed and analyzed in this essay. Furthermore, to examine traditional literary depictions of women, I will use Mary Anne Ferguson’s anthology Images of Women in Literature, which consists of eighty-two excerpts of works that illustrate these images through time. Cather based My Ántonia on a childhood friend and Hawthorne made historical investigations of the Puritan society since he had long been interested in the fate of strong women who had suffered at the hands of his forefathers (Tapper xi, Wineapple viii). These works thus reflect reality and therefore I also want to examine in what ways the characters’ gender performances conflict with, or conform to, social norms of the time. In order to do that, I will investigate the social expectations for
women in the Puritan society and in the late nineteenth century. You Have Stept Out of Your Place by Susan Hill Lindley addresses and compares women’s situations from Puritan society to the twenty-first century and the author writes about women who have stepped out of their confined places, as I argue that Ántonia and Hester have. I will use her terms Good Wife and True Woman to describe women during the times when these novels are set. The former term describes a Puritan woman and the latter term describes a woman during the nineteenth century. Both terms comprise socially expected feminine qualities and are used regardless of the women’s marital status.

While these canonical novels have been analyzed from a feminist perspective previously, I have not found any research where they are compared using Butler’s theory. My purpose is not only to analyze the novels separately from a gender performance perspective; I will also investigate what they have in common in this regard. When it comes to My Ántonia, I will mainly develop my arguments from works by Katharine Dowling and Gordon Tapper who both examine gender fluidity in My Ántonia and suggest that the male and female protagonist have access to both feminine and masculine positions. Dowling argues that the theme of overcoming the socially constructed gender roles is apparent in Cather’s life as well as in her novel while Deborah G. Lambert argues that Cather has depicted Ántonia according to stereotypical patterns of female dependence and sexuality. I will refute Lambert’s claim and show that Ántonia is a symbol for feminism. When analyzing The Scarlet Letter, I will show that Hester too is a feminist role model due her strength and independence. I will build off of arguments by Regina Barreca who argues that the female protagonist in The Scarlet Letter is irrepressible, especially in comparison to her male counterpart. Sylvia Eeckman argues along the same lines but she also claims that Hester returns to Puritan patriarchal values in the end of the story, a claim that I will refute.

I argue that Hester, as well as Arthur, Ántonia and Jim, successfully break many gender norms and challenge traditional notions of femininity and masculinity by not living up to the expected roles. More specifically, the protagonists of both novels break gender norms in similar ways. The female characters do this by contesting the social expectations of dependence and subordination but they also comply with other norms such as motherhood and they sometimes work in the expected female sphere of the home. The male characters break norms by not living up to the expected acts of dominance, independence and mental strength. The location of these performances is similarly significant for both the male and the female protagonists: outside of town, they all oppose the norms more than they do in town. In these
situations, the female protagonists not only challenge expectations but demonstrate a desire to exist outside of the constraining norms imposed on them.

2 The Characters’ Gender Performances

2.1 Gender Performativity

What is gender? According to Butler, gender is a set of bodily gestures, movements and enactments of various kinds that “constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” 519). In Gender Trouble and Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,” Butler challenges notions of gender and develops her theory of gender performativity. She argues that gender is culturally constructed, not the causal result of biological sex and not fixed: “[…] man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (Gender Trouble 6). In other words, gender should be seen as a fluid variable that can shift and change in different contexts and at different times, it should not be seen as a fixed attribute. This idea of gender as free-floating means that it is not connected to an ‘essence,’ but instead to a performance. Thus Butler argues that gender is what a person does in a specific context and time, rather than an authentic “core” self. Moreover, this performance must be repeated and this repetition is a reenactment of meanings already socially established (140). Butler claims that these reenactments of “naturalized conceptions of gender” are socially and historically constituted through rehearsal, like a theatrical script (“Performative Acts” 526). This suggests that there are expected ways to act, depending on whether the biological sex is male or female, and there are social laws sanctioning or punishing these acts if a person performs according to, or out of, script (520).

Due to these sanctions and prohibitions, and to create a semblance of order, gender performances have the intention of maintaining gender within its binary frame (Gender Trouble 140). To facilitate this, there are many deeply entrenched and sedimented expectations of gendered existence (“Performative Acts” 524). For example, Ferguson claims that terms stereotypically associated with women are weakness, passivity and dependence, while terms associated with men are strength, aggressiveness and independence (20). The expected performances connected to these terms show that there are well-sedimented stereotypes of what acts a person of a particular sex should perform. What follows is an
examination of how the protagonists in the two novels perform their gender according to an expected standard and which performances destabilize the naturalized categories of masculine and feminine. The examination starts with *My Ántonia* since the characters in this novel show an awareness of breaking gender role norms.

### 2.2 Gender Norm Destabilization in *My Ántonia*

*My Ántonia* is replete with female characters and most of them are very strong and colorful. In this novel, many of the characters do not live up to the expected roles, which leads to them being judged in different ways. The ones who most dramatically transcend the expectations of gender-based acts are Ántonia and Jim. Both characters are fluid in their gender performances, in particular Ántonia who embodies both feminine and masculine ideals.

Ántonia embodies a male gender norm ideal that destabilizes the naturalized categories of feminine and masculine in different ways. To begin with, she is as physically strong as a man and this strength is visible through her hard work with the men in the fields, starting when she is very young and continuing through pregnancies and old age. She says “‘I can work like mans’” (Cather 82), showing that she knows that it is not expected for a girl to work in the fields, but that physical strength is something desirable for men. She also knows that her physical strength and good health have helped her cultivate the land successfully and by doing so, she can better provide for her children (220). Though many poor immigrant women in America during this time had to work outside the home to help support their families (Hill Lindley 206-207), the field was not the expected place to do this. For an American woman at this time, the home was the only appropriate sphere and the assumedly only place where she could be really happy (53). But Ántonia shows that performing physically demanding tasks in a male sphere also can make a woman happy and successful.

It is not primarily the performances that involve male chores and body work that destabilize the gender norm, but the performances of mental strength, independence and integrity that Ántonia shows. In *Images of Women in Literature*, Ferguson analyzes the novel *A Story of Experience*, written in 1873 by Louisa May Alcott. She writes that Alcott’s “sturdy, independent protagonist makes us question the view that passive ‘true womanhood’ was a universal nineteenth-century ideal” (ix). The examination of Ántonia’s performances yet again questions this old view. She too is sturdy and independent, not passive, and already from the beginning of the novel she says to Jim that she wants to help her family and make
the land into a good farm, something she accomplishes due to her physical and mental strength (Cather 83). Her mental strength can be seen in the same episodes as when she demonstrates physical strength; she has set her mind to survive in her new country and for her the only way is by working with supposedly male labor in the fields. She does not find this impossible; instead she chooses to do it and she becomes successful. Furthermore, she shows mental strength and integrity when she comes home pregnant and disgraced after having been fooled by Larry Donovan. She continues with the male chores without complaining and when the baby is born, its photo is displayed in a gilt frame at the photographer’s (197). Ántonia is not ashamed of baby Martha and while married to Anton Cuzak, she says that she would never have married him if he had forced her to give up Martha, which is also a sign of her integrity (228). According to Hill Lindley, the ideal American woman at the time, the True Woman, was to be submissive, not independent (52). Ántonia’s decisive manners and her way of running the farm show that she refutes this idea; she is not submissive but independent.

Even though Ántonia is very appreciated by the other characters, she is still judged by them for acting out of script by performing expected male acts of physical strength. However, she does not care. Butler claims that as a way of maintaining discrete genders, “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Gender Trouble 140). These punishments can be either obvious or indirect and in this novel, the punishment Ántonia receives consists of judgmental comments and attempts to change her performances. Starting from their childhood, Jim perceives Ántonia as someone who does not conform to the expected norms: “I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner” (Cather 33). Ántonia uses a superior tone which Jim hates, and even though he is a couple of years younger, he feels less masculine when she is protecting him since he sees offering protection as a masculine act. Even when Ántonia works with domestic chores, Jim states that she has some “male” qualities: “she would break into a run, like a boy” (135). Butler claims that some gender performances render social laws explicit (“Performative Acts” 526). This means that when someone goes against the norms, the expected “laws” for social conduct become clear. When Ántonia starts working in the fields, she certainly goes against the norms and the reactions come immediately. To start with, Jim’s grandmother Mrs. Burden says that by working in the fields “[s]he’ll lose all her nice ways and get rough ones” and Jim feels that she has already lost them: “Ántonia ate so noisily now, like a man” (Cather 84). Furthermore, he judges her for being proud of her masculinity when he states that she is “too proud of her strength” since she only talks about how much she can lift and endure (84). He resents her masculine manners and physical strength, traits that are very much connected to being a male.
Even society rejects her actions by joking about her for doing things meant for men, not women (84). In the American society at the time, there was an expected separation by gender. Men and women were believed to have radically different natures and were expected to function in radically different spheres most of the time (Hill Lindley 53). The way she is punished is therefore a way for her society to try to enforce a binary understanding of gender but Ántonia does not care. She says that she likes to be like a man, she proudly shows her swelling muscles and she accepts being tanned like the men working in the fields (Cather 92), therefore society’s different sorts of punishment seem futile.

Jim has trouble coping with Ántonia’s fluid gender performances. This can be seen when he judges her for her male strength while appreciating her performances of supposedly male acts of mental strength and independence. One example is when Jim is angry about Ambrosch, Ántonia’s brother, directing “the feelings as well as the fortunes of his women-folk” (85). He says that Ántonia often quotes Ambrosch’s opinions to him, meaning that she has no will of her own (85). Jim wants to see her as mentally strong and independent even if he loathes it sometimes. A second example is that Jim is bitter over the fact that people feel sorry for the pregnant Ántonia when she has left Larry (193). Feeling sorry for someone suggests that the person is mentally weak and he does not think of Ántonia as weak: “I could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity” (193). This shows that he thinks of her as strong and he appreciates this trait in Ántonia. He also calls her “Tony,” which Tapper suggests is the author’s way of emphasizing Ántonia’s androgyny (xxx). This is an example of how confused Jim is about Ántonia’s gender role performance. He can handle her mental strength, but not her physical strength. This implies that he has trouble coping with her fluid gender performances.

In contrast to Mrs. Burden and Jim, there is one character that accepts that Ántonia has the bodily strength of a man: Ambrosch. He is pleased with her “male” qualities since he hires her out “like a man” (Cather 99). Moreover, the Burdens want to take her to town to work domestically, but Ambrosch does not want them “to take his sister to town and dress her up and make a fool of her” (102). It seems that he does not want to admit that Ántonia must meet these social expectations. Letting his sister perform a male gender without punishing her benefits him, since that means that he has help when it comes to field work. His way of dissolving binary understandings of gender therefore does not necessarily suggest that he wants to change these norms.

In the town, Black Hawk, Ántonia’s performances mostly comply with what is expected from her gender. She is hired to take care of domestic chores and the children at the Harlings.
The running of a household and taking care of family have been, and still are, expected female performances. These are included in what Ferguson claims to be the traditional image of the Wife (20) and what Hill Lindley claims to have been the expectations of a True Woman (52). Ferguson further argues that women in general are usually not admired for their own individual characteristics but for those appropriate to their expected role (20). Thus, in contrast to her male gender performances in the country, her domestic performances, fit for a True Woman, are perceived more positively by the other characters. While cooking, cleaning and taking care of babies, Ántonia fulfills the gender expectations. When she starts working for the Harlings, Jim contrasts his earlier depiction of her by saying that she is “brushed and smoothed and dressed like a town girl, smiling at us with perfect composure” (Cather 107). Ántonia seems to appreciate this “female” life she has with the Harlings, but she leaves the Harlings when she cannot act the way she wants; she is accused of being seen as “free and easy” (136), a role that is not socially accepted for a lady in Black Hawk. Hill Lindley writes that other expected traits for a True Woman were piety and purity (52). In this part of the novel the Harlins seem to believe that she challenges this role. Even though she performs mostly according to expectation in the town, she thus fails in certain respects.

Because of the heavy field work, Ántonia’s performances go more against the norms in the country, but she also performs her expected gender there. This one performance consists of Ántonia raising eleven children. Though she delivers an illegitimate child and goes against the norm of female purity, she does comply with the most stereotypical female performance of them all: motherhood. For women in nineteenth century America, childrearing was one of the most important tasks (55). When Ántonia complies with this expectation, it makes her even more appreciated by her society. For example Mrs. Stevens says that Ántonia is “a natural-born mother” (Cather 206). When dealing with traditional images of women in literature, the image of motherhood always seems to be present. Ferguson writes about archetypes that are particularly strong stereotypes and widespread images (2). One of these archetypes is the Great Mother, the giver of life (93). Ántonia lives up to this archetype even though she continues to contrasts her expected acts with the rough ways of working like a man. This however, seems to be her only performance which complies with the norms in the country.

Even though she conforms to the expectations at times, this does not mean that she compromises her independence. Her way of performing against, as well as complying with, the norms show that a woman successfully can perform supposedly male acts as well as supposedly female acts. One critic who does not agree is Lambert who argues that Ántonia’s role as archetypal mother and “the source of the fertility and energy that have transformed the
barren Nebraska prairie into a rich and fruitful garden” shows a betrayal of female independence (689). She writes:

The conclusion of *My Ántonia* has usually been read as a triumph of the pioneer woman […]. But in fact […] Cather and her narrator celebrate one of our most familiar stereotypes, one that distorts and reduces the lives of women. The image of the earth mother, with its implicit denial of Ántonia’s individual identity, mystifies motherhood and nurturing while falsely promising fulfillment. (689-90)

Admittedly, her role as mother fulfills the stereotype of a Great Mother, but Ántonia’s performances show that she is more than this. Throughout the novel she is fluid in gender: even when she is the image of the Great Mother while at the end of her pregnancy, she mixes gender roles by working in the field dressed in men’s clothes (Cather 204). However, she manages to combine these two seemingly gender-differentiated expectations since she leads a happy, and for her, successful life. Thus her fulfillment of one stereotype does not compromise the independence from patriarchal control that she has been able to achieve.

On the contrary, Ántonia’s performances make way for women to move out of their confined places. Dowling writes that in the New Woman era when Willa Cather wrote, “neo-feminist women strove to free themselves from the oppression of the stereotypical, domesticated, feminine roles in a patriarchal society. Cather incorporated the same struggle and assertion into the identity of her characters in *My Ántonia*” (79). By analyzing Ántonia’s gender performances, I can assert that this seems true for her. However, it is not just the way she performs her fluid gender acts that shows this quest, it is the fact that she is aware of breaking gender norms that makes her believable as a feminist role-model. When she has started working for the Harlings, she says to Mrs. Burden: “‘Maybe I be the kind of girl you like better; now I come to town’” (Cather 104). She is thus aware of the “social sanction and taboo” by which Butler claims gender identity is compelled (“Performative Acts” 520). She knows that Mrs. Burden has arranged this domestic job for her so that she can perform her expected gender. The female sphere of the home was a “place where traditional values could be preserved and upheld” (Hill Lindley 55), and at times Ántonia complies with this norm to keep the discrete genders. However, her independence and will to break free from these sedimented gender acts make her go her own ways. Since “gender appears to the popular imagination as a substantial core” and “a correlate of biological sex” (“Performative Acts” 528), moving outside of only some of the gender expectations can be seen as a big step.
Ántonia moves outside of several expectations and this suggests a wish to separate gender from the binary frame that her society has set up.

In contrast to Ántonia, the novel’s male narrator Jim Burden aligns mostly with expected ideas about femininity instead of masculinity. The perception of Jim not acting his gender starts already in his early childhood. Dowling writes: “When young boys would be out helping with chores and working the land, Jim Burden occupies the kitchen and women’s spaces” (87). Clearly, this was not men’s natural habitat (Hill Lindley 53). While Ántonia works in the appropriate sphere for men, Jim sits in the appropriate sphere for women. Another example of Jim’s female gender performance is when he waits inside for the men at nightfall. He admires the male workers for their hard work and asks himself how they can endure it (Cather 48). He seems to be impressed by body work and these hard working men but he never shows any interest in assisting them. He might already recognize that he is not suited for this kind of work. Instead, he performs what is expected of young girls and avoids all kinds of male labor.

Furthermore, Jim’s lack of control shows that he does not act his expected gender role. The expected submission of a True Woman demands a dominator, an assignment usually attributed to men (Hill Lindley 53). The quality of controlling and dominating is however something Jim lacks. At the end of the novel he admits to Ántonia’s sons that he has been in love with her (Cather 222). But throughout their relationship he never acts on it. He has the perfect chance to propose to her after she has left Larry Donovan, but he does not; “instead he runs off to law school and marries a socially prominent woman” (Tapper xxxiv). It is never revealed why he does not make this effort. In addition to failing to act decisively when it comes to Ántonia, he lacks the strength to take action in other aspects as well. Before going to study at the university, he is “moody and restless” and jealous of Charley Harling who “was already at Annapolis” while he was “still sitting in Black Hawk” through no fault but his own (Cather 142). He does not show a strong will of his own. When he is invited to a picnic with the “hired girls,” he answers: “‘Maybe I can, if I won’t be in the way’” (151). This shows his hesitancy, insecurity and lack of control. His failure to act decisively makes him perceived as an insecure man and when he is compared with Ántonia, the reversed gender roles are visible. There are several scenes where Jim is feminized by his actions. One example is when he kisses Ántonia after a dance (146). She draws away and chides him. In this situation, he has no control. Tapper claims that “[t]hey do not follow the expected script of a male-female relationship. Ántonia assumes a masculine posture by maintaining firm control over the situation. […] Jim appears feminized as he acquiesces without putting up a struggle” (xxviii).
A couple of pages earlier, Harry Paine catches and kisses Ántonia against her will (Cather 135). Tapper writes that “[t]his minor incident reminds the reader of the gender norms, beside which Jim’s acquiescence stands out more sharply” (xxix). Even though Ántonia protests, Harry takes control over the situation and does what he wants to do. This is an extreme example of masculine power, but I argue that it shows that Jim is far away from taking firm control over things. By comparing his performance to that of another male character’s, I claim that his transcendence of gender role norms is even more visible.

Jim is also feminized while performing seemingly male acts of protection. Protection is something that a man should offer; at least Jim seems to feel that way by insinuating that Ántonia’s protective manners are not fit for a woman (Cather 33). One example of Jim being feminized during a protective performance is when he, quite reluctantly, agrees to stay at the Cutter’s house in Ántonia’s place (160). From the beginning, Jim performs his gender correctly: a man should offer protection and be brave. However, he is almost raped by Mr. Cutter who believes that he is Ántonia. Tapper calls it an “androgynous limbo” in which “Cather destabilizes the reader’s perception of gender through a tangled crisscrossing of roles” and he claims that “Jim has once again been feminized, but this time he rebels against the threat to his masculinity” (xxxi). While I agree that he has been feminized, he does not fully rebel against the threat. He rebels to a certain point since he is not raped; he uses violence to escape from the situation, he surely does not quietly acquiesce. Nonetheless, he runs away from the situation and seeks refuge in his grandparents’ house; an act that could not be seen as masculine in this context. In addition, his not wanting to talk about it afterwards indicates that he knows that what he was exposed to is not fit for his gender. Another example of Jim’s feminization in a protective act is when he kills the snake and saves Ántonia and himself. This act seems to superficially reinforce his role as a male protector. However, Jim was very scared and admits that it was real luck (Cather 35). Nevertheless, Ántonia sees him as a hero and says: “‘I never know you was so brave, Jim’” (35). She thus reveals her expectations of how a man should act in a situation like this. Dowling writes that Jim “does not even realize he is the masculine hero until after Ántonia praises him for his heroic efforts and manly actions” and that “he does not understand how to act as a male” (87). I claim that this scene shows more than Jim’s ignorance of male acts; it also shows Ántonia setting the gender roles straight. She appraises his bravery and to not lose his expected gender, Jim plays along, even though he knows that he did not act like an expected male protector at all.

When Jim eventually acts according to male gender expectations, the setting is the town. Just like Ántonia, Jim’s performances contrast the expected norms more when he is in the
country, where he mostly sits in the female sphere of his grandmother’s kitchen. In the town he performs more expected male gender acts which are seen as he goes to college. Even if studying does not involve body labor, higher education is mostly a male occupation in the setting of this novel and here Jim starts a relationship with a woman. Moreover, Jim believes that his only success in life so far, is his oration when he graduates (Cather 150). This suggests that he has now accomplished something in his life; a graduation to become a lawyer and an appreciated oration. Both accomplishments are male acts, fit for his expected gender. Yet another example of Jim acting his male gender during his time at college is when Jim hears about Ántonia still going out with Larry Donovan. Jim then says: “I think I’d better go home and look after Ántonia” (173). Lena Lingard, another strong female character, answers in frank amusement; she and the reader realize that Ántonia does not need anyone to look after her. Jim’s protection is seen as a male act but the ironic part is that he is not aware of his utterance being perceived as misplaced and the act unnecessary. Nevertheless, he here performs an act connected to the role of the male protector.

Even though the reader is invited to perceive Jim’s performances as going against the norms he is never punished for this. The other characters do not complain or judge Jim’s performances even though he clearly acts out of script. His performances often make the reader see him as weak but the other characters do not seem to perceive him as such. Butler argues that punishment for performing out of turn serves as a policy of gender regulation and control and that praising for performing according to the script also could be a way of controlling gender performative acts (“Performative Acts” 528). Indeed, Jim seems to be more appreciated by the other characters when he, though unconsciously, performs traditional male gender roles. When he “offers protection” by “saving” Ántonia from the snake and “agreeing” to sleep at the Cutters, he gets praised by Ántonia. Though Ántonia does not judge Jim for sometimes performing out of script, her appraisal when he acts according to script lets him know what is expected of a man. Even though Jim is not punished for acting against the gender role norms, he is sometimes depicted as more feminized for acting his expected gender. In the rape attempt scene, his sudden choice of acting according to script does not help him; in the end he still fails to act his gender and is instead once again feminized. This suggests that he sometimes is punished while acting according to the expected norms, but never for acting against them.
2.3 Gender Norm Destabilization in *The Scarlet Letter*

The leaders and most other characters in the Puritan community where *The Scarlet Letter* is set are all men. One of few female characters is Hester Prynne who transcends her expected gender role several times, just like the male protagonist Arthur Dimmesdale. Hester is a courageous and mentally strong female character, depicted by the narrator as a person who acts with a “natural dignity and force of character” (Hawthorne 50). She does not perform according to the expected female gender norms of weakness, passivity and dependence. Instead she embodies the male ideals of strength, assertiveness and independence. However, she complies with some norms and she lives up to the archetype of a Great Mother. Consequently, she embodies both ideals. Arthur too breaks some gender role norms since he is depicted as weak and dependent. Nevertheless, he also embodies both ideals, at least in certain locations.

To begin with, Hester embodies the male ideal of mental strength and assertiveness. In the Puritan society in the seventeenth century, a Good Wife was considered to be spiritually and mentally weak (Hill Lindley 17), something that Hester cannot be accused of being. The narrator compares her to “[m]en of the sword” casting away “the fragments of a broken chain” (Hawthorne 155), reinforcing the strength that she shows throughout the novel. She is decisive, and takes control of her own life. Hester’s mental strength and assertiveness can be seen from the very opening scene when she is exposed as a sinner in front of the inhabitants of her community and refuses to play the role of a weak, dependent woman. She refuses to name the father of her child Pearl: “‘And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!’” (65). By refusing to name her fellow sinner, she has to bear the burden of their sin alone. Standing exposed in the market place is a test. However, she is able “to convert the scene into a kind of lurid triumph” and she stands tall and calm (74).

Moreover, Hester does not conform to the expected female ideal of obedience. Good Wives were supposed to be obedient and not challenge male authorities such as husbands and ministers (Hill Lindley 22). Hester challenges both. By committing the sin, she is disobedient to her husband and at the Governor’s, she disobeys the patriarchy and her minister when she courageously prevents the authorities from taking Pearl away from her. She defiantly says to the Governor and Arthur: “‘[…] Ye shall not take her! I will die first!’” and “‘[…] Look thou to it! I will not lose the child! Look to it!’” (Hawthorne 106, 107). She stands up for herself and strongly argues her case against the powerful patriarch, and wins. This suggests that the patriarch has little control over her and that she is quite disobedient.
Furthermore, Hester is independent. Without the help of a man, she provides for herself and her daughter Pearl. Even though needlework is seen as a female art form, “then as now, almost the only one within a woman’s grasp” (77), it is this very art that gives Hester her independence. She refuses to run away; instead she stays in the community and bears her “shame” with dignity. Another scene where her independence can be seen is when she meets Arthur in the woods. He pleads with her: “‘Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!’” (187). This shows that he needs Hester to act for him in a decisive way. By making plans for them to run away together and start a new life, she takes control over the situation and decides what they shall do next. More than admitting that she is strong, he also shows how independent she is by how dependent he is on her.

Hester’s independence also contributes to her refusal to be dominated by her society and its judgment. Hester does not comply with the expected subordination to male authorities; she is not dominated by anyone. By her own choice, she wears the symbol of domination, the scarlet letter, her whole life. Barreca claims that Hester defines the letter “rather than letting it define her” (270). This however, does not necessarily mean that the letter does not define her at all; not even her own daughter seems to know her without it (Hawthorne 201). Nevertheless, Hester changes the meaning of the “A” through her strong and helpful behavior. She lives independently with her daughter, never complains and does not commit any more sins. Also, by being so helpful, the society where she lives sees her in a new light: “Such helpfulness was found in her – so much power to do and power to sympathize – that many people refused to interpret the scarlet ‘A’ by its original signification. They said that it meant ‘Able’” (152). The community views the letter as a token of her many good deeds, not as a token of her sin. Yet another scene where the significance of the altering of the letter is seen is when the narrator reports a rumor of Hester being hit in the chest by an Indian’s arrow, but the arrow fell to the ground without injuring her (154). This not only suggests that the meaning of the scarlet letter has changed; it is also a sign of her society perceiving her as strong, almost like “a sort of superhero” (Barreca 260). She is now so appreciated by her community, even by the men, that they are willing to interpret the letter differently and this means that Hester is no longer dominated by the “A” which was their punishment.

In addition, the letter helps Hester reach a sphere where women seldom were found, that is, at the center of attention. Butler claims that the gender reality that exists makes it difficult for women to move outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination (Gender Trouble 141). Being a woman in a Puritan settlement, Hester does not have any real political power. However, her sin, the placement of the “A” as well as the fancy art work of the letter put her
in the center of society, considered a male sphere. Hester uses luxury fabrics, gold thread and her great skill to make the letter stand out. The matrons in the market place are upset over this: "‘Why, gossips, what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment?’" (Hawthorne 51). This is an important quotation for two reasons. First, it shows Hester’s courage to challenge the patriarchy, even if it is not her intention to defy it. Secondly, the words “godly magistrates” and “worthy gentlemen” show the matrons’ respect and admiration of the patriarchy and by contrast their lack of respect for Hester, an ordinary, though sinful, woman. The matrons clearly believe that the position this beautifully embroidered letter gives Hester is not fit for a woman. Nonetheless, Hester stands for what she has done and she can manage being at the center of people’s attention, even though this is a place usually reserved for men. While at the center, that is, in a male sphere, she has a chance to influence her community, and she does. She does this by being a caring citizen, but she refuses to be silenced.

Not only does she reach the male sphere stated above, she also steps into another male sphere which makes her masculinized. As she lives her life apart from the society, she starts analyzing, a performance of mental strength reserved for men in this setting. Her thoughts on future societal positions for women after her nocturnal meeting with Arthur at the platform suggest that she, at least temporarily, steps into yet another male sphere. The narrator notes that her assumption of this “freedom of speculation” is seen as “a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter” (155). In other words, this is not something that a woman should do. In the same chapter, this loss of femininity is expressed quite directly by the narrator: “She who has once been woman, and ceased to be so […]” (154). Some attributes that were seen as essential for a woman has departed from her and her physical beauty has faded and been hidden under a cap (154). This suggests that she has undergone a change; when performing acts expected of men, even her physical appearance changes to be less “ladylike.”

At the end of the novel however, Hester performs according to the expectations of her sex, though without compromising her independence. Childcare, neighborly support and charity were the duties of a Puritan Good Wife (Hill Lindley 19). The comfort and counselling Hester offers to her fellow citizens is an example of neighborly support and the products she gives to the poor are examples of charity. She thus complies with some gender role norms. Additionally, because of her motherhood and counselling, she embodies the archetype of a Great Mother. Already at the beginning of the novel the narrator refers to her as “the image of Divine Maternity” and she shows her motherly care and devotion to her child through the
novel (Hawthorne 53). She is not ashamed of her illegitimate daughter; she is proud of her. She dresses Pearl in the most beautiful dresses; she does not try to hide her (85). Hester schools Pearl according to traditional religious values, but she knows that she fails to stress obedience and she is not able to break Pearl’s willfulness as a Good Wife was supposed to do (Hill Lindley 55). Pearl is “not amenable to rules” and Hester lets her be independent and a little disobedient, just like herself (Hawthorne 85-86). The narrator claims that Hester has been softened by maternity (89). It might be true that she was more passionate and defiant at the beginning of the novel. However, that does not necessarily mean that she has been weakened or humbled. Eeckman argues that, at the end of the novel, Hawthorne has transformed Hester “into a disciplined woman” and that “Hester’s rich nature has to be subdued and moulded into an ideal of womanhood” (13). Eeckman’s idea of a subdued mother who returns to her community to repent is seen as the defeat of a strong character who tried to resist patriarchal society. I reject this idea and claim that Hester is stronger than ever at the end. She finds an internal peace and after a several-year-long absence, she is strong enough to return to a society that has not treated her kindly. Consequently, maternity and the fact that Hester is less passionate and defiant when she returns do not necessarily mean that Hester is humbled. She is in perfect control of her life; the choice to return is her own. Hester is not punished when her performances go against the expected norms for her sex. Clearly, she is severely punished for committing adultery, but since “female piety was no different from male piety” (Hill Lindley 25), the punishment for going against the expected norms for both sexes would probably have been as severe for Arthur, if he had admitted his sin. Even if Hester is not punished for acting out of the ‘female script,’ she is even more appreciated while performing her expected gender. By rearing Pearl in addition to caring for the sick and dying people and counselling other women in the community, Hester is the archetype of a Great Mother, embodying the feminine ideal to the fullest. Because of these acts she is very much appreciated by her community. Her fulfillment of certain female gender norm expectations probably facilitates her fellow citizens’ positively changing interpretations of the letter. This suggests that for a greater appreciation, she must embody a female ideal. There is nonetheless a limiting factor to this ideal feminine performance; Hester mainly lives up to it when she is in the town. Here she performs the duties of a Good Wife. Even though her performance at the Governor’s, where she speaks up against the patriarchy, was not proper for her expected gender, this situation involves a performance that complies with expectations. Eeckman writes that “she still needed the assistance of a male in a superior social position” (18). That means that when she tells Arthur to help her, she has to rely on the
help he can give her since he has more political power in this situation, and in town. In the forest, on the other hand, Hester can ignore society’s distribution of power and be stronger than Arthur. It is also in the woods that she starts speculating and by living independently in her little house outside of town, she manages to live without patriarchal control. This suggests that her performances contrast the expected norms more often on the outskirts of town and in the forest than in the town.

On the outskirts of town, Hester seems to want to get rid of sedimented gender norms. Here, she escapes the earlier patriarchal control and when her feminist thoughts appear, she realizes that “[t]he world’s law was no law for her mind” (Hawthorne 155). She further speculates: “the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position” (156). This suggests that she is aware of the sedimented gender norms and seemingly wants to get rid of them. She might not actively perform feminist acts, but by speculating, she at least approaches a feminist progress: “The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action” (155). All developments start with a thought and Hester’s awareness of the inequality is a starting point. The narrator also claims that “[t]he scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread” (190). That punishment can therefore be seen as an important step for gender equality. Moreover, the narrator says that she has “a part to perform in the world” and “[t]he tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free” (79, 190). This indicates that she, in fact, is free and independent, at least outside of town.

The male protagonist Arthur Dimmesdale’s performances stand in sharp contrast to those of the female protagonist. To start with, the narrator often depicts him as physically and mentally weak and passive, attributes assigned to Puritan women. His weakness and passivity are seen already in the novel’s opening scenes when he is portrayed as having “an apprehensive, a startled, a half-frightened look” and as being a person “who felt himself quite astray and at a loss in the pathway of human existence” (63). Another example of his weakness is his performance on the night when he meets Hester and Pearl at the scaffold. After this meeting, Hester’s opinion is that “[h]is moral force was abased into more than childish weakness” (150). In addition, Arthur himself admits to his weakness (189). Not only do Hester and Arthur himself find him weak, in fact, even the narrator calls him “pitiably weak” and all of his cowardly actions further strengthen this picture of his character (205). He is seen as spineless when he holds hands with Hester and Pearl at the platform in nighttime but refuses to perform the same act in daylight (144). To be fair, he thinks that someone might
see them and he seems to long for this possibility. However, he has the chance in daylight but he does not take it. Even Pearl believes that he is cowardly by saying “Thou wast not bold! – thou wast not true!” when she refers to the situation mentioned above (147). Even at the end of the novel when he has decided that he will confess the adultery, the confession is so vague that many of the people do not even believe that his confession was an acknowledgement of his guilt (245). Arthur’s lack of mental strength suggests that he does not perform according to society’s ideal of masculinity. The contrast to Hester’s qualities makes him even more feminized.

Furthermore, Arthur acts against the script when it comes to male dominance. Puritan women were supposed to be subordinate to dominant men but Arthur is not one of those men. As an example, watching Hester from an elevated position on the balcony in the novel’s opening scene, Arthur starts out in a male position of force and dominance. However, this position does not last for long. He directly loses his force when he fails to exhort Hester to confess the truth at the pillory (63). While resisting his futile attempts, Hester’s performance is stronger than his. Considering the expected female obedience to ministers (Hill Lindley 22), Arthur’s domination over this sinful woman is expected by the crowd. Also, because of Hester’s and Arthur’s earlier intimate relationship, the expected act should have been an act of female obedience. However, Hester does not comply with the ideals of a Good Wife and thus Arthur fails and is not seen as dominant.

Moreover, Arthur is dependent. An example of his dependency is seen in the scene in the woods where Arthur begs Hester to advise him what to do (Hawthorne 187). Barreca comments on this scene: “I, for one, can think of no other male character uttering an equivalent statement to a female character in all of American literature, but I can think of endless heroines making almost precisely this same plea to men” (268). Certainly this does not have to be a sign of weakness or dependence, it is a situation full of anxiety and Arthur shows that he trusts Hester. Nevertheless, his plea to a woman undoubtedly suggests that he is dependent, not self-reliant and independent, which would be the appropriate quality for a man in this context.

Even though Arthur mostly acts according to expectations for a female gender, he does in fact embody the masculine ideal at times, though only in town. His social position of being a popular clergyman with great oratory skills clearly helps Arthur keep a certain male dominant position and status in his community. One of few things that Arthur succeeds with is his final oration. On this occasion, “[t]here was no feebleness of step,” he performs his speech perfectly and his verbal skills are yet again appreciated (Hawthorne 226). While performing
this act, he embodies a masculine ideal since he is in a powerful position and this performance gives him the status that is expected of a man, even though he is so weak that he is dying. However, similar to Hester, when Arthur conforms to the expected norm for his sex, it is always in town, never outside of it. In the woods he “looked haggard and feeble, and betrayed a nerveless despondency in his air which had never so remarkably characterized him in his walks about the settlement, nor in any other situation where he deemed himself liable to notice” (179). In the woods there is no town patriarchy to back him up; he has no real power at all.

Arthur is not punished when he acts out of script, at least not by his community. On the contrary, his weakness and vulnerability are seen as signs of his “celestial strength” (239). When his health fails, it is accounted for by “his too earnest devotion to study, his scrupulous fulfilment of parochial duty” (113), not to his weakness or cowardice. He is very much appreciated by the patriarch as well as by the people. However, the narrator often depicts him as weak and on occasions Hester does too. This suggests that Arthur is judged by them but that he is not seen as feminized by his society at large.

2.4 Comparison of Gender Performances in the Two Novels

There are many similarities in how the characters perform their genders in *The Scarlet Letter* and *My Ántonia*. As women, Hester and Ántonia perform very strong roles and their strength and independence are seen as male attributes. On the contrary, Arthur and Jim perform quite weak roles, suggesting that they have been feminized. However, all of the protagonists conform to the expected norms in certain locations.

Both Ántonia and Hester break cultural boundaries by performing acts that go against expected gender roles. Butler sees the naturalized conceptions of gender as constructed and not inherent, thus they are capable of being constructed differently (“Performative Acts” 520). These female characters constitute their expected gender differently but they do this in more or less the same way. To start with, they transcend the assumed gender roles for women by acting with strength and assertiveness. Hester shows this by defying the patriarchy and by arranging an “escape plan” with Arthur (Hawthorne 106, 205) and Ántonia shows bodily and mental strength by working the land and controlling most situations. The female protagonists are perceived as strong and decisive by the male protagonists as well. In *My Ántonia*, Jim often depicts Ántonia as strong: “She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races”
(226) and in *The Scarlet Letter*, Arthur’s appeal to Hester shows his belief in her strength (187).

Furthermore, the many independent acts that they perform show their unwillingness to fit into the ideal of a dependent and subordinate woman. They do not show obedience to what Butler calls “a historically delimited possibility” (*Gender Trouble* 139). An example of this obedience is that they are not dependent on men to survive. Hester never remarries, she is self-supportive through her needlework and she acts decisively. Ántonia runs the farm with little help from others and even though she does marry, she does not act the expected role of a subordinate anddependent wife. One example of her going against society’s expected role of a dependent wife is that she manages to keep Anton on the farm even though he does not wish to live there (Cather 234). Ferguson argues that women in literature, as well as in society, have been valued by their roles in relationship to men (2). Since these female characters go against these norms by performing roles that are not in relation to anyone else but themselves, they threaten certain ideals. Ferguson further claims that, through history, men have been afraid that women’s freedom would cost them their rightful positions and “if more and more women are not forced into dependency, the wife-mother ideal is threatened” (339). These two female protagonists undoubtedly threaten this ideal. Butler argues that a failure to repeat socially and historically expected performances shows that there are possibilities of gender transformation (*Gender Trouble* 141). Ántonia and Hester show that they will not be forced into dependency and their fluid gender performances thus oppose the social and historical expectations. This indicates that the binary understanding of gender might be changed.

As a result, Ántonia’s and Hester’s performances that break cultural boundaries suggest a wish to separate gender from the binary frame that their societies have set up. To begin with, both of them eventually choose to live outside of town, where they can be more independent from patriarchal control. Furthermore, Ántonia’s awareness and nonchalance of breaking existing gender role norms suggests that she wants to get rid of these constraining norms for women. However, she still contributes to the binary understanding of gender when it comes to men. This is seen when she praises Jim for his supposedly male acts, thus setting the gender roles straight. Hester’s speculation suggests that she too is dissatisfied with lingering gender role norms. Even though she does not seem aware of her performances going against the norms and she does not explicitly act for desired changes, her thoughts are indeed feminist and imply a wish to erase gender inequality.

Despite their masculinization, both Hester and Ántonia comply with the expected gender roles in certain respects, without compromising their independence or strength. Butler claims
that we are “compelled to live in a world in which gender is stabilized, polarized, discrete and intractable” (“Performative Acts” 528). It is therefore not strange that these characters still, in some ways, adapt to their expected roles. An example of this adaptation is that they validate the archetype of the Great Mother. Both Ántonia and Hester are proud of their first-born daughters, neither of them tries to hide them even though they evoke scandals and are symbols of supposed sins. They accept the consequences of what they have done. When the heroines of the two novels act their expected gender by working domestically, by showing a willingness to help others and by demonstrating maternal love, they are appreciated the most by the other characters. They then embody the feminine ideal to the fullest. However, this does not mean that they compromise their independence from patriarchal control. By combining expected male and female gender role performances, they are able to live happy and successful lives.

Similar to the female protagonists, the male protagonists Arthur and Jim also often perform their genders against the norms. They do not always embody the masculine ideal. In fact, they lack many of the supposedly male attributes such as mental strength, independency and the ability to dominate women. In The Scarlet Letter, the inability to dominate women is visible when Arthur fails to make Hester name her child’s father (Hawthorne 65). His mental weakness is seen throughout the novel. In My Ántonia, Jim shows his inability to act decisively during the snake incident as well as in the situation where he tries to kiss Ántonia (Cather 35, 146). He also spends most of his time in the home, a female sphere, and he fails as a protector. Due to these performances, they are perceived as feminized.

Though mostly feminized, Arthur and Jim also comply with the expected gender roles for their gender, in the same locations as Ántonia and Hester comply with theirs. Being a popular clergyman with great oratory skills clearly grants Arthur a certain position and status in his community. Jim being a male in the middle-class grants him a favored dominant position. They have both studied a lot, seen as a male act at the settings of the novels, and are perceived as eloquent orators. Both have performed much appreciated orations: Jim’s graduation speech and Arthur’s passionate sermon during the New England Holiday (Cather 149, Hawthorne 230). These orations are two of their most successfully performed acts and they are typically male acts since they freely speak their minds from elevated positions. These acts are performed in the setting of the town, suggesting that the limitations of going against the expected norms for men are similar as for the female characters.

To begin with, all four protagonists seem to conform more to gender role norms in town than outside of town. Butler writes that in society, there is a tacit collective agreement to
perform and sustain discrete and polar genders (*Gender Trouble* 140). It seems that in the setting of the town, the protagonists have tacitly agreed to polarize genders. On the contrary, Ántonia and Hester’s performances seem to dissolve these polarized genders outside of town, where they show more strength and independence. Even though Ántonia is appreciated while working as a hired girl, she never seems as free as when she works in the fields and at the end she decides to live outside of town. Hester too lives her life on the outskirts of the town. Here she has found her peace and independence. Jim and Arthur also comply more with the expected norms for their gender in town. On the outskirts of town, however, they align more with notions of femininity. Jim does not do any male labor in the fields; in fact he does very little in the countryside. However, by coming to town, it is less visible that he does not do anything and eventually he starts studying to become a lawyer; a male profession. Arthur too is stronger in town. Here, his clerical attributes are appreciated and his weakness is not seen as a problem. But outside of town, with or without Hester, Arthur lacks strength. Jim’s and Arthur’s social positions do not help them there and their weaknesses force them to rely on the female protagonists in this setting. I claim that the reason why the female protagonists are stronger and happier outside of town is because they are more independent there. They can work with “men’s” chores or speculate without risking being exposed to patriarchal control. On the contrary, the male protagonists are stronger in town since that is the best place for them to perform their male genders. Only outside of town are these women more equal to men, suggesting that there are limitations to where it is acceptable, or possible, for the characters to act out of script.

Furthermore, there are situational limitations for acting out of script. Both female protagonists are allowed to perform a male gender when they need to be strong for others. That is, in certain cases, they are not punished for going against the expected norms. Ántonia is even appreciated by her brother when she can help him with male chores. By Jim, on the other hand, she is appreciated for her mental strength and other supposedly male mental qualities, but judged because of her physical strength and protective manner while Jim is not punished at all. This shows that Ántonia challenges gender role norms even with a character who accepts some gender fluidity and who himself is fluid. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester is not directly punished for acting out of script, but she is more appreciated while performing according to script and Arthur is appreciated by his society no matter which gender role he acts. This suggests that, in most situations in these novels, it is more allowed for a man to be feminized, than for a woman to step out of her place.
The protagonists in *My Ántonia* know when they act out of script, but the protagonists in Hawthorne’s novel do not seem to be aware of their breaking norms. When Ántonia says that she likes to be like a man (Cather 92), she understands that these performances are seen as manly, but she does not have what Butler calls “a terror over losing proper gender” (*Bodies That Matter* 238). Jim too is aware of the fact that he does not act his expected gender when he talks about the snake incident and that it was just luck (Cather 35). They are both thus aware of the social sanctions and punishments of gender identity. On the contrary, Hester does not seem aware of the fact that she transcends gender roles, even though she speculates on the inequality between sexes. Similarly, Arthur lacks the awareness even though he admits to being weak and he finds Hester strong. The appreciation and lack of punishment from his community suggest that he is unaware. A difference between the novels is thus the awareness of breaking gender role norms and the fact that Hester, Arthur and Jim avoid being punished when they move beyond their expected gender roles while Ántonia is punished in certain situations. These situations always include body labor, conducted in the male sphere of the field. This suggests that, to be judged by the other characters, the female protagonists’ violation of the norms must be very clear, preferably by stepping out of the expected physical sphere.

3 Conclusion

Even though the novels are set in very different times, there is a similar challenge of traditional gender role norms. All protagonists perform genders that destabilize the naturalized conceptions of masculinity and femininity, which opens up for a more gender-equal society. Even though both Hester’s and Ántonia’s performances fulfill their societies’ most important role for a female at the time, the one of mother, the rest of their fluid gender performances show a compromise with feminist ideals. By combining expected male and female gender role performances, they are able to live successfully without too much societal punishment for acting out of script, even if it is more allowed for a man to be feminized, than for a woman to step out of her place. The limitations of where it is acceptable, or possible, for the characters to act out of script suggest hope for more gender equality. Outside of town, the female protagonists are independent and more equal to men. Since all four oppose the norms for their gender in this location, the characters come closer to a gender-equal society for both sexes, at least outside of town’s restricting norms.
Both female protagonists can be seen as feminist role models. Their fluid gender performances oppose the constraining social and historical expectations in the different time periods when the novels are set. This suggests that their desire to exist outside the binary understanding of gender is similar, even if their quests are separated by more than two hundred years. The novels were written only sixty-eight years apart, which could explain this similarity. However, the way they act on their desire to equalize gender is different. The different societies depicted in these novels might explain the difference between these performances. In the time period between Hester’s and Ántonia’s societies, gender equality had advanced. Hester’s feminist struggle is perhaps more explicit because of her feminist speculation in the woods, but she does not actively work against the constraining norms. Ántonia more actively works against these norms since she has an awareness of the expected norms but she is still not afraid of breaking them. Furthermore, Hester chooses to conform to the norms at the end of the novel while Ántonia continues to perform a fluid gender all through the novel. Nevertheless, both of these works move toward more gender equality since these strong and courageous female characters undermine the validity of the passive and subordinate female stereotype, thus showing a potential to their readers to change how they perceive gender and the norms that come with it.
Works Cited


