

# **Performative Language and Gender Identity in Cather's *O' Pioneers!* And *My Antonia***

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to examine Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918) in the light of Judith Butler's theories of performativity of language and gender identity. In most of her works, Cather uses the medium of language and gender to establish identity as a means of identification. Throughout this study, the researchers strive to mainly explore the attitudes of female protagonists and their gender identity as well as the performative nature of the characters' language and gender through the evocation of environment. Butler argues that both sex and gender are culturally constructed according to set categories. For her, one thing is certain: language is the medium through which we create and perform our identity. Accordingly, in these novels, Alexandra and Antonia ignore the norms of their societies and subvert the discourse by building their gender through performative language and gender identity.

**Keywords:** Performativity language, Discourse, *My Antonia*, Willa Cather, Judith Butler

## **Introduction**

The presence of nature and identification with the Nebraska prairie in Willa Cather's writings have made the critics place her writings in the classification of regional novels. Cather creates subservient female characters in her novels who strive to challenge the social norms of society and subvert the patriarchal system. Her female protagonists disapprove of all the conventional stereotypes as well as discourse of their societies against themselves, and by means of their performative language and identity, they construct their agency and save their families.

For instance, *My Antonia*'s main character is Antonia Shimerda who becomes obsessed with her family as soon as her father dies, and through performative language and gender, she reverses all society discourse and finally succeeds in all she has wished for. Thus explained, Jim states that "she was a rich mine of life." (p. 141). The main female character in *O'Pioneers!*,

Alexandra, is a lady who fights against the hierarchical property ownership and the patriarchal system in her own family. She firmly stands against her brothers with the intention of taking control of her family lands and explores a new system of property inheritance to subdue patriarchy.

As Douglas W. Werden has argued, Cather's *O Pioneers!* has been read through many perspectives including "family history, agricultural history, domestic plots, American migration, and women leaving the home" (p. 199). However, several critical views regarding our concern in this paper are discussed in the following.

In his illuminating article entitled *She Had Never Humbled Herself" Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata as the "Real" Pioneers of O Pioneers!*, Werden deals with the issue of gender barriers constructed by society. In this regard, he argues:

Alexandra's movement in the novel is from an initial rejection of traditional women's roles to an exploration of how she can be a woman in a dominant position and a family woman simultaneously, while Marie's movement is from a farm woman who embodies contemporary ideals of women's roles to rejecting them because of their oppressiveness. (p. 199)

Notable to Werden's discussion is his contention that both Alexandra and Marie "appropriate traditional male roles" (p. 200, italics ours) and seek the power of self-definition. Accordingly, he maintains that Cather's novel not only attempts to deal with feminist issues at its core but also tries to subvert the "discursive power of male writers over American mythology" (211).

Another *O Pioneers!* critic, Rula Quawas has situated Cather's novel within the context of American literature and its definitions of heroism. With this regard, Quawas argues that while the literature of the American frontier has always created heroines "[w]ith no agency of their own," (p. 239). Cather's creation of Alexandra Bergson bridges the gap between gender and heroism. Accordingly, she contends:

Alexandra is a woman who embodies all the attributes admired in the finest of male characters in the literary canon when faced with trials only a woman could confront. Her

independence, courage, loyalty, and unconventionality are heroic characteristics that make her unequivocally a hero of the American literary canon. (p. 240)

Quawas' reading of Cather's *O Pioneers!* is noteworthy in that it refuses to fall into the trap of defining heroism according to male-oriented attributes of heroes in American literature. With this regard, Quawas reveals that American literature is replete with female heroines, including Alexandra Bergson, who are determined to expand their horizons and have their own ways.

Cather's *My Antonia* has been read from the perspectives of nature and region, Ecofeminism, classical, Hybridity, violence, and nostalgia. Another critic, Karen A. Hoffman, has offered an invaluable reading of Cather's *My Antonia* by inspecting to what extent the writer has crossed the categories of identity. With this respect, Hoffman argues that Cather's exploration of identity crossing in *My Antonia* is visible in that she writes "as a female author who speaks in the voice of a male narrator and by depicting characters, especially the narrator Jim Burden, crossing back and forth between feminine and masculine and immigrant and American-born positions" (p. 25). As opposed to some critics who have read Cather's use of a male voice as her tendency toward masculinity and the desire to be man, Hoffman argues that Cather's use of a male narrator indicates her prowess at resisting the fixed categories which bind the feminine. In other words, Cather has maintained her ambivalence in that she "neither renounces her feminine position nor treats masculine position as inaccessible to her" (p. 26). Hoffman also argues that due to Cather's not aligning herself with the feminist movement, these identity crossings on the part of Cather suggest her liking for a society in which power and privilege circulate between male and female subjects.

With regard to the discussions above as well as the available literature on Cather's *O pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, the present article aims to explore and subsequently prove how gender roles are constructed as well as how the protagonists subvert the dominant norms of their societies to reach independence and agency through the means of performative language according to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Thus, with regard to the available literature on these two works of fiction, the present essay seeks to offer a new interpretation of the novels. In the following sections, firstly the concepts of identity, performative gender, and performative

language are defined. Secondly, the analysis results of the novels based on these key concepts and theories will be provided.

### **Through a Definition of Identity**

According to *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity*, in contemporary times, identity is grounded in beliefs about the past, heritage, and ancestry, as well as belonging to a people, a place, a set of beliefs, and a way of life. In addition, it is through language that people and places are named, heritage and ancestry recorded and passed on, and beliefs developed and ritualized; therefore, what languages people speak and how they speak them is crucial. All languages are subject to heterogeneity and changeability. Through this variation, the individual's identity is indexed and interpreted. With this regard, Joseph maintains: "who they are, what they care about and like, and what they aspire to" (p. 19). The evolution of sounds, words, and grammatical forms and the development of mass communication has not limited the local differences in language use. In a given locale, people from different generations, religions, cultures, educations, occupations, and those associated with gender speak differently and are indexed. As John. E. Joseph maintains:

Identities are manifested in language as, first, the categories and labels that people attach to themselves and others to signal their belonging; second, as the indexed ways of speaking and behaving through which they perform their belonging; and third, as the interpretations that others make of those indices (p. 19).

Identity is not something essential, but it is something constructed. It is not something possessed but performed. Every individual performs the role of identities that are frequently altering, and based on the different conditions we negotiate and renegotiate them (Joseph, p. 24). Identity is associated with who people are and to what category they belong, such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, generation, sexual orientation, social class, etc. In addition to all these categories, gender, and sexual orientation are indexed in the language (Joseph, p. 25).

Sartre Hall also elaborates on the definition of identity based on language, stating that who we are is always related to what we say. He continues: "Identity is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of a culture" (p. 44). In

other words, whatever we might say and think about ourselves and others as people will always be in terms of a language provided for us by history.

### **Performative Language and Discourse**

The concept of performative language was first used by philosopher John. L. Austin who differentiated constative language, which describes the world and can be evaluated as true or false, from performative language, which does something in the world. According to Austin, performative language contains speech acts, such as promising, betting, swearing, etc. Borrowing from Austin,, Butler posits that subjects are constituted through the repetition of speech acts. According to her, no action can be done without a word; therefore, it is the speech that acts. As a result, subjects' identities are formed through their performative language.

Today the ideas of the performativity of language and gender identity are considered crucial issues that have considerably influenced literary criticism by rethinking the terms including speech act, performative language, discourse, sexual difference, gender identity, politics, and ethics through the lens of many critics, such as Judith Butler, John Langshaw Austin, and Michael Foucault who have published several essays on the above issues.

Judith Butler, a prolific American critic of gender studies, published her dissertation under the title of *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflection in Twentieth-Century France* in 1987. She gained great stature through the publication of two important works on gender and sexuality. In the first one, i.e., *Gender Trouble*, she argues “IDENTITY was a function not of ESSENTIALIST gender roles or characteristics but rather of PERFORMATIVITY” .The second one is entitled *Bodies that Matter* in which she analyzes the status of sex as a regulatory social norm with particular emphasis on how this norm is inscribed on the body and how it “materializes” the body .Butler also published another significant book entitled *Excitable Speech* in which she mainly focuses on ethics and the ways that public speech and language can cause social problems and make individuals take political actions. In this book, Butler maintains that “language is performative”. She also proposed that the terms we use to identify a person's gender and sexuality are modes of performative language. Judith Butler has also collaborated with some critics and philosophers of the time, such as Ernest Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, in various research areas. To name a few, *Critical Theory, Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality* (2000). Her outstanding contribution reflects the possibilities of “contingent universals” that could avoid the

absolutism of Enlightenment traditions of critical thinking, but that could also galvanize and consolidate movements for social change.

For Butler, language is a pressing issue, and she is almost concerned with what can be done by using words. In this regard, Salih argues: “Gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language” (p. 64). Butler claims that gender is a performance, but she distinguishes performance and performativity. According to Salih, Judith Butler’s concept of performance presupposes a preexisting subject, and performativity contests the very notion of the subject. In fact, the first philosopher who elaborated on this issue in his lectures was J.L. Austin in his work *How to Do Things with Words*, and Butler connects the concept of performativity to Austin’s speech act theory. Austin has highly influenced Judith Butler’s theorization of gender performativity. He claims at a certain point in his discussion that to say something is always to do something as well. In this book, Austin distinguishes two broad types of locutions: *constatives* which are something about a fact or state of affairs and are considered to be true or false and *performatives* which are sentences, such as questioning, praising, promising, etc. Therefore, according to this idea, Salih points out that “language acts. In fact, language is a crucial issue for Butler, and she is much concerned about what can be done with words: “Language and discourse ‘do’ gender. There is no ‘I’ outside language since identity is a signifying practice, and culturally intelligible subjects are the effects rather than the causes of discourses that conceal their workings” (Butler, 1990, p. 145). Thus argued, it can be contended that identity is performative.

Austin maintains that all utterance is in some sense an act and that by saying something we are always doing something (Salih, 2002, p. 100). Austin distinguishes the utterance that does something, such as sentencing someone to life imprisonment, pronouncing a heterosexual couple man and wife, or naming a ship, and those that lead to a sort of consequences. The former is called “illocutionary speech acts,” whereas the latter is called “perlocutionary speech acts” As Austin puts it, taking a man or woman to be your lawful husband/wife is not simply saying or reporting a wedding situation. Rather, it is literally doing what you are saying or in Austin’s words, “we are indulging in marriage”. In the same way, by pronouncing the words “I name this ship Lucy” or “I bet that it will rain,” I am producing the very act of naming or betting (Salih, p. 101).

Many post-structuralists remark that all our senses of self and identity or subjectivity are constructed and performed by language. As a structuralist linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1974) believes “language, far from reflecting an already given social reality, constitutes social reality for us. Meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by language.” (cited in Baxter, 2016, p. 36).

Derrida, a post-structuralist and deconstructionist theorist, centers his criticism on plurality and non-fixity of meaning. Based on his theories, “standard categories of identity such as woman, teacher, wife, mother, friend, scholar, writer and so forth are only temporarily agreed by social contracts to which individual speakers are usually compliant” (cited in Baxter, 2016, pp. 36-37).

Such terms are always open to contestation and redefinition as the struggle for the ‘true’ meaning of each term takes place between social groups with different power interests. So for example, for a modernist feminist, the term ‘woman’ encapsulates a universal ‘female’ nature that can be clearly differentiated from an essential male nature, whereas for a postmodernist feminist, ‘woman’ is viewed as a fluid subject position that only becomes salient within certain discursive contexts but not in others (Baxter, 37).

Another post-structuralist, Michael Foucault believes that “language and the range of subject positions it offers always exist within *discourses*” (Baxter, p. 36). Foucault maintains, language does not appear to be transparent and natural about human experiences but always exists within a historically particular discourse. With this regard, Baxter explains:

According to Foucault, discourses are responsible for the ways in which individual identities are recognized, constructed, and regulated. This process of identity construction is reciprocally achieved through the agency of individual language users who are subjectively motivated to take up particular positions within multiple discourses, and through the ways, they are variously positioned as subjects by the social, normalizing power of discourses (p. 38).

Foucault claims in *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* that a discourse is a “group of statements” that links to a “single system or formation” (p. 182).

Furthermore, the subject is taken into existence through the same statements. Butler in *The*

*Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, draws on Foucault and maintains that the process of subjection occurs as a form of “power” and she continues remarking that this concept is governed by an outside of “oneself”, for finding out “what one is”, that one for its form relied upon power. (p. 1). For Foucault “the subject is not spoken”, and the subject which is produced via a kind of “power and discourse” is “neither singular nor sovereign in their productive action” (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 5). Butler goes further to claim that the subject is constructed upon power, and that power is acting through the psyche. It should be within a “linguistic category” since it is first produced via language. The subject should be subjected to language, and gain “intelligibility” (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 11).

Aneta Pavlenko in *Second Language Learning by Adults* argues that when an individual moves to another culture, he/she views and performs gender in a different way. A person may choose from a limited available range of subjectivities that exists in the foreign language culture.

As stated by Sara Salih, Butler’s work traces the processes by which identity is constructed within language and discourse. Therefore, Butler believes that individuals do not create or cause institutions, discourses, and practices, but they create or cause individuals by determining their sex, sexuality, and gender. (Salih, p. 10). As for this, Jones also argues:

Butler’s concept of ‘performativity’ demonstrates that gender is produced via cultural acts, including language, dress, and other forms of self-presentation. Butler argues that we perform our gender, albeit often unconsciously, through mundane and everyday acts. We engage in these acts – such as putting on makeup or a dress – again and again until we no longer view them as a performance; they seem to be natural (p. 211).

Butler posits that aspects of identity including gender must be reaffirmed and demonstrated in public by repeatedly performing particular acts based on cultural and social norms, which themselves are constructed in perpetual flux. Therefore, “individual characteristics, such as femininity and masculinity are nothing but symbolic enactment that is semiotically indexed through speech, body language, dress, appearance, and possessions” (Baxter, p. 40). Accordingly, this is the spoken language that is a “repeated stylization of the body”, and it determines that women and men have different speech styles and interaction norms.

Terry Eagleton (1991) argues that when people talk, they express themselves in linguistic terms which are “culturally, historically and ideologically available”. One’s ideology is reflected



in one's discourse i.e., ideology presents one's beliefs, concepts, customs, and so forth. In every culture, there are various "hegemonic" constructs. People try to practice the dominant performances that seem to be 'normal'" (Edley, 2001). In *Gender Trouble* Butler argues that "gender has constantly to be reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts in accordance with cultural norms which define 'masculinity' and 'femininity'" (Butler, cited in Cameron, 1997, p. 49). Cameron also notes that although Butler insists that the way we perform gender is affected to a large extent by cultural, and social norms, males and females can perform gender in a rebellious way rather than just abide by what is hegemonic.

John Gray (2016) states in his essay "Language and Non-normative Sexual Identities" that Butler believes that there is no preexisting or essentialized self to reflect. She sees it as a medium in which individuals put themselves within particular discourses and they index particular identities

On the whole, the relationship between language and identity, in Butler's view, is that sex and gender as certain elements that we take to be 'internal' features of our psyche are what we produce through bodily acts.

### **Performative Gender**

According to Butler's *Gender Trouble*, "gender is culturally constructed; thus, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor fixed as sex" (p. 9). "For Butler, subjects are actors who simply get up and 'perform' their identity on a metaphorical stage of their own choosing. She does claim that identity is a sequence of acts. She also argues that there is no pre-existing performer who does those acts, no doer behind the deed. For her, both gender and identity are effects rather than a cause. They are the effects of institutions, practices, and discourses." Accordingly, "Butler is not interested in tracing back identity or gender to its origin or cause since it doesn't have one. Butler maintains that there is no sex that is not always already gendered. All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence. This seems to point towards the conclusion that gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (*Gender Trouble*, 25). "For Butler, gender is not stable, but fluid and changes from person to person and from context to context. Like gender, self-identity is performative, that is, what one does at a particular time, place and context determine one's gender and identity, not a universal concept of who we are.

She further maintains that our identities are connected to what we do and are not to our supposed essence. Therefore, our identity is an *effect* not a *cause* of our performance.” (Gender Trouble, 22).

Based on Butler’s theories, data for the present study has been collected using library-based research. The researchers posit that this study is going to be read based on Judith Butler’s concept of performativity of language and gender, and the way the characters do their language and gender roles in society. Furthermore, Butler’s theories of “Performative Gender”, “Performative Identity”, “Performative Language”, “Culture”, and “sex” are fully discussed. The study develops an analysis of the gender identity of the major authors in Will Cather’s *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!*, particularly Alexandra Bergson and Antonia Shimerda, and delineates how they have dedicated themselves to the land and laboring on farms for the betterment of their social status. This study investigates the way these female characters construct their gender, and the way they prove the performativeness of their language and gender.

### **Performative Language in *O’ Pioneers!***

According to Austin, performative language contains speech acts, such as promising, betting, swearing, etc. Alexandra promises her father to revive their familial farm along with her brothers through the quote “I will do all I can, father... We will, father. We will never lose the land” (*O Pioneers!*, 14), she is instituting her identity through language and doing so her performative language is established. However, after her father’s death, Alexandra never lets her brother take control of the land or usurp her power. Alexandra’s performative language is manifested as follows.

Alexandra, you will have to do the best you can for your brothers.  
Everything will come on you.”

“I will do all I can, father.”

“Don’t let them get discouraged and go off like Uncle Otto. I want them to keep the land.”

“We will, father. We will never lose the land” (*O Pioneers!*, 14).

Bronwyn Davies and Horace Romano Harré argue that individuals are positioned through narratives and stories, and these positions construct one’s character. There are two kinds of positioning, the first of which is “interactive positioning,” which is when we speak, we position

people and when people address us, they in turn, construct a position for us. The second one is “reflexive positioning,” which is when one positions oneself. Individuals’ identity is never fixed but constantly changing since they express each other’s identity through social interactions. One’s identity is always subject to change based on the position one is situated even by other’s practices. Therefore, through language individuals construct versions of identity in different contexts.

Using the same discourse of language and “interactive positioning” that Davies and Harre explicated, Alexandra positions her patriarchal brothers and states that “the land belongs to the future” (*O Pioneers!* 169). Through her language, Alexandra subdues her brothers’ patriarchal intentions, changes them, and positions them differently. Alexandra states in the novel,

“Lou and Oscar can’t see those things,” ...“Suppose I do will my land to their children, what difference will that make? The land belongs to the future, Carl; that’s the way it seems to me. How many of the names on the county clerk’s plat will be there in fifty years? I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brother’s children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while.” (*O Pioneers!*, 169).

Further, she tries to position herself out of domestic life through her language which Davies and Harre call “reflexive positioning,” in which one positions oneself.

Accordingly, being both a subordinate “sister” in the family and the “head” of the family farm, Alexandra’s masculine independence in economic matters reaches a high tension after a couple of years. Alexandra’s brothers, Lou and Oscar, come to her and demand she abdicate her responsibility and control of the farm. When the people of the town figure out about Alexandra’s passion and fondness for Carl Linstrum who has just come back to Nebraska, her fondness increases the doubts among them that the destitute Carl is after Alexandra’s wealth and property. Oscar tells her sister, “People think you’re getting taken in” (*O Pioneers!*, 91). When Oscar and Lou witness that their sister is getting involved in a romance in old age, they appeal to the public sentiment and claim that she is ridiculing her family. “You ought to think a little about your family. You’re making us all ridiculous” (*O Pioneers!*, 91). Daniel Worden in his book, *Masculine Style The American West* maintains that these claims of public sentiment stage a consolidation of the Bergson family, with the patriarchal heads of the family, Oscar, and Lou,

against some phantom, moralistic public. They change their words of argument from what “people” might think of to what their sister plans to do with “our property” (O Pioneers!, 93). Lou and Oscar’s language contrasts with that of Alexandra’s alternative “we,” that considered collective outside of patriarchy. Their language as they are against women being in charge of farm ownership and doing business sounds misogynistic. Lou turned to Oscar,

That’s the woman of it; she tells you to put in a crop, and she thinks she’s put it in. It makes women conceited to meddle in business. I shouldn’t think you’d want to remind us how hard you were on us, Alexandra, after the way you baby Emil (O Pioneers!, 93-94).

The above quote implies that the brothers have contradictory perceptions of the “family” as the fundamental unit of social organization. Lou’s perception of the family is a hierarchical one, not a collective one that Alexandra mentions. According to Worden, the structure of the Bergson family is ambivalent; it is both collective as “we” and hierarchical wherein property “really belongs to the men”. “Oscar spoke up solemnly. ‘The property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title. If anything goes wrong, it’s the men that are held responsible’” (O Pioneers!, 92). This family structure Worden says is both a way of belonging and a way of establishing dominance and Alexandra’s perception of her family and the land is beyond the patriarchal relationship. She attempts to expand her family by hiring Swedish immigrant maids, taking in the Crazy Ivar, and finally marrying Carl Linstrum. And this doesn’t mean that Alexandra performs as a maternal figure.

In the conversation between Alexandra and her brothers; Alexandra says:

Maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; but I certainly didn’t choose to be the kind of girl I was. If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree (O Pioneers!, 94).

Alexandra introduces her gender identity as anything except feminine. Her “hardness” evokes the patriarchal hierarchical family tree, but is instead a vine, a growth without hierarchical connotation” (Worden, 94). In other words, masculinity is a dominant mode of gender for “female” Alexandra.

Alexandra's use of the "vine" tree metaphorically contrasts with the patriarchal family "tree", the "White Mulberry Tree" to critique the conventional romance. Worden analyzes Alexandra's metaphor as such:

If conventional gender roles conform to the temporal model of "reproductive futurity," a temporality that locates the future as the telos of human exertion insofar as the natural product of heteronormative social relations is the production of children, then this section's "tree"—like Alexandra's "vine"—also signifies a series of affective relations that fall outside of the bounds of conventional heterosexual romance (Worden, 94).

Continuing the notion of performativity, Butler discusses the concept of agency which is closely connected to performativity. For Butler, agency occurs when within a discourse or a power structure, a subject attempt to act against that discourse then he/she constructs his/her performative gender. Thus, by opposing the power structure, he/she constructs an agency since the agent is not outside of the context. Accordingly, being a subject, Alexandra prior to anything proves her performative gender identity through repetitive farm work and then stands against her brothers' patriarchal power and discourse using her language.

In summation, constructing her gender identity, Alexandra adheres to doing farm work repeatedly, and by doing so she makes her gender identity performative. Furthermore, through her opposition to the patriarchal and hierarchical family structure and breaking the established discourse of her society which is patriarchy and domesticity, she becomes an agent by means of language and discourse. As Simone de Beauvoir maintains "One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" which means gender is created through a "stylized repetition of acts" and it is not a stable identity. Moreover, Butler claims individuals do not create or cause institutions, discourses, and practices, but they create or cause individuals by determining their sex, sexuality, and gender. (Salih, 10).

### **Performative Language in *My Antonia***

Cather writes *My Antonia* through a male point of view, Jim Burden, and she obviously portrays the established patriarchal system of the nineteenth century and the way Antonia strives to disrupt such a discourse. Jim shows his disapproval of Antonia working on land outside the domestic sphere. Although Jim is totally aware of Antonia's poor living conditions and that her labor saves her family, he does not support her to work. The dominant discourse of the nineteenth-century lies in what Barbara Welter, an American historian, in her study "The Cult of True Womanhood" asserts:

“The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all were ashes. With them, she was promised happiness and power.” (Welter, 1)

Thus, according to Welter in the nineteenth century, society valued men over women, and a nineteenth-century woman was not allowed to escape from domesticity and what the dominant discourse determined. Nevertheless, Cather’s protagonist not only subverts such a discourse but also deviates from the accepted gender norms of the society which is again another disruption of discourse through repetitive acts and language. In her study, “Willa Cather: Male Roles and Self-Definition in *My Antonia*, *The Professor's House*, and “Neighbor Rosicky,” Kristina Anne Everton states that “Cather’s characters are often frustrated, unsatisfied, ambiguous, often androgynous, and unhappy with the roles that they have been playing.” (Everton, 35). Everton implies that “*Antonia*’s character suggests a mixing of male and female gender roles, much like Cather’s adolescent cross-dressing.” (35).

After *Antonia*’s father commits suicide pretty much like Alexandra, *Antonia* determines to perform the role of her father. She wears her father’s clothes and boots and starts to work hard on the land.

“She wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap...She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor’s.” (Cather, *My Antonia*, 56).

Regarding performative gender and language in *My Antonia*, *Antonia* best proves Butler’s theory of performative gender, which is initiated through language when she says: “Oh, better I like to work out of doors than in a house!” or her most problematic sentence “I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man.” *Antonia* proves her gender to be masculine and when her performative gender performs the acts as Butler asserts through the performances the “I” of the subject is constructed. In addition, *Antonia* through such language and discourse builds her new identity, what Davies and Harre call “reflexive positioning.” According to them, one can intentionally or unintentionally position oneself. Therefore, *Antonia* intentionally eliminates domestic life and positions herself to farm work.

According to Judith Baxter, an individual's identity is formed based on the accepted 'subject position' within the community or culture and is made available to them through particular discourses within a social context. Hence, if the individuals ignore the approved discourses in terms of speaking, acting, and behaving they may be stigmatized by others as 'weird', 'misfit', 'freak', or an 'outsider'. "Language; therefore, acts as a regulatory force to pressurize individuals to conform to socially approved patterns of speech and behavior" (Baxter, 37). Thus, Antonia's disapproval of the discourse and her new subject position which is holding on to "be like a man" renders her an 'outsider' since she did some works "a girl ought not to do" and "the farm-hands around the country joked in a nasty way about it" (My Antonia, 57).

Paradoxical to her claim: "I like to be like a man", Antonia performs according to the female gender during the fiction as well.

Much as I liked Antonia, 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 (My Antonia, 27).

Judith Butler in one of her essays "Performative Acts" argues that "gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent it is performed" (Butler, 527). This means that certain acts belong to and express a certain sex or gender norm and these acts either conform to or contest their expected gender identity (Butler, 527). Consequently, the distinction between looks and appearance can define gender to a certain degree. Hence, dressing in male clothes instead of female ones are regarded as violating female gender norms and discourses. Jim describes Antonia returning home from the land and having on "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. Based on Butler's concept of 'performativity' Jones remarks that "gender is produced via cultural acts, including language, dress and other forms of self-presentation." (Jones, 211). Antonia kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's" (My Antonia, 56). While Antonia is working in the fields, she tries to merge the clothes of both genders. She wears a dress and rolls up her sleeves with man's boots and a fur cap. The narrator, Jim, attempts to compare

Antonia's tan arm and neck to the sailors in order to masculinize her. Still, there is a strong motivation for Antonia's fluidity of gender.

As Judith Butler maintains in *Gender Trouble* that gender is always a "doing", by that doing a subject is formed, however, a subject is not prior to gender itself. She continues:

"Gender proves to be performative, that constitutes the identity it is supposed to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990, 34).

Drawing on Butler's claim and considering the notion of doing the question that comes into our mind is; what parts of a speech in a sentence do something? The answer will be the verb. Hence, that is why Butler asserts that "gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes for we see that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (*Gender Trouble*, 34). It is quite clear that because the verb does something, thus they perform it and as a result, gender is regarded as being a verb rather than a noun. Then, when someone by what he/she does is a gendered subject, it could be claimed that he/she performs him/herself, therefore; gender is argued to be "performative."

In several scenes during the fiction, Jim depicts his passion and desire for Antonia and his failed masculinity. One time Antonia is left alone to care for wicked Mr. Cutter's house, Jim accepts Antonia's plea to sleep at Cutter's place on her behalf, for Mr. Cutter was a womanizer, and always had malicious intentions to young girls, and "Tony [looks] so troubled" (*My Antonia*, 102). It is clear that Jim does not hesitate to protect Antonia and indeed Mr. Cutter does have an ill intention for Antonia, but as soon as he is going to rape Antonia, he finds Jim in her bed. Jim merges his male body with the internalization of female attitude expectations, and he feels frustrated to love Antonia. The tragedy falls when Jim is attacked both violently and sexually while he was in bed and is pulled into a sexually subservient role that emasculates him easily. Moreover, Jim's attempts to fight back are less manly, he pulls "a handful of whiskers," and goes with "shouting," bending Cutter's "thumb" back, and then runs away (*My Antonia*, 103). Mr. Cutter is later seen with a face "striped with court-plaster" (*My Antonia*, 104), suggesting he had just got a simple scratch. In spite of the fact that Jim is a young adult who has got a healthy energetic body and Mr. Cutter is an old man and indeed weaker than him, there is no description



of any punch or serious injuries one would expect from Jim. But the narrative goes with Jim looking himself in the mirror and describing himself so miserably as such:

“My lip was cut and stood out like a snout. My nose looked like a big blue plum, and one eye was swollen shut and hideously discolored. Grandmother said we must have the doctor at once, but I implored her, as I had never begged for anything before, not to send for him. I could stand anything, I told her, so long as nobody saw me or knew what had happened to me. I entreated her not to let grandfather, even, come into my room. She seemed to understand, though I was too faint and miserable to go into explanations. When she took off my night-shirt, she found such bruises on my chest and shoulders that she began to cry. She spent the whole morning bathing and poulticing me, and rubbing me with arnica.” (My Antonia, 103).

In a sense, Jim’s reaction and response to the attack were much like a reaction one could expect a woman of this period to show toward the rape. The attack destabilizes the heteronormative compulsion of patriarchal society and undermines Jim’s stability of masculinity. Jim chooses to recover secretly and privately rather than facing his attacker, hoping to save his reputation. His feminized gender role orientation clearly depicts his gender struggle.

After such a miserable conflict, Jim notices Antonia is “sobbing outside [his] door” (My Antonia, 103), and his reaction is to “ask the grandmother to send her away”, he feels he “never [wants] to see her again” and indeed he states that “[he hates] her almost as much as [he hates] Cutter” (My Antonia, 103). In this scene, Jim demonstrates that Antonia is desired by a man and this is Jim’s first evidence. Suffering from this sharp pain both physically and psychologically, Jim realizes that he cannot have her. He cannot protect her from the wicked men of society, which makes him angry and embarrassed. Jim fails to identify himself as Antonia’s partner because, however, he is masculine through the assumption of his male body, Cather makes him suffer from feminization.

Jim wants to construct his gender and prove his manliness through her language, performance, and acts. Now Jim is furious at Antonia, for he was coerced to defend himself in her bed. He took this risk to prove his manliness and gender identity, and now he is worried that the men of his town may learn about this incident, and he would lose face. Thus, he asks his grandmother not to send for his grandfather, for he feels ashamed to see him. He also did not like to visit anybody as he claimed, “If the story once got abroad, I would never hear the last of it. I could well imagine what the old men down at the drugstore would do with such a theme” (My

Antonia, 103). Finally, Jim learns that he has to stick to male roles and masculine gender identity, and he was bitterly disappointed and upset when a woman forced him to appear battered within that role. It is noteworthy to say that Antonia, through her language, convinced Jim to sleep in her bed. That is, through an “interactive positioning,” Antonia positioned Jim in her bed, and that caused Jim’s identity to change. One’s identity is always subject to change, and through discourse and language, they construct versions of various identities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, with having Butler’s theory of performativity of language and gender in mind, it could be argued that Alexandra and Antonia, the main characters of the novels, subvert the dominant discourse and challenge the accepted norms of society through a stylized repetition of the acts which Butler calls performative gender. Moreover, each character uses the medium of language to stand against this dominant discourse which is patriarchal power of the men in society and create their new gender identity by opposing this power structure. Thus, in *O Pioneers!* Alexandra liberates herself from domestic life and adheres to repetitive manly labor on land and never allows her brothers win the hierarchical ownership of the properties. She disapproves of her brothers’ intentions when she says the land belongs to the future. In this way not only Alexandra positions herself and brothers but also, she subdues them via language and discourse. Accordingly, Alexandra becomes an agent as Butler maintains one becomes an agent as soon as he/she opposes the dominant discourse or power structure. Therefore, she constructs her agency through her performative gender and language. On the other hand, Antonia, the protagonist of *My Antonia*, much like Alexandra conforms to a pattern of lifestyle which is not accepted by norms of society by means of language; saying: “Oh, better I like to work out of doors than in a house!” or “I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man.” Then she sacrifices herself to land work and wears men’s clothes and overtly acts masculine. She deviates from all social norms, the traditional attributes of womanhood, and discourses that society has determined and ignores male privilege. Butler asserts that gender is always a doing and performativity is free from the matter of choice and theatricality. Antonia shapes her agency through strong resistance to power and norms of society as well as Alexandra and they both transmit the old civilization to a newly established one.

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