

Reading Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* from an Intersectional Perspective



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Abstract

Considering the fact that many people are oppressed because of their gender and race, whilst others are privileged because of theirs, is a great reason to why we should reflect on the concept of intersectionality. This paper aimed at reading Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* from an intersectional perspective with the purpose of opening up for certain themes. In addition, it also sought to explore how reading the novel from an intersectional perspective could be a way of practicing critical literacy. The gap found is that despite there being many studies that use intersectionality as an analytic tool, there are however few studies on how to implement the theory into the classroom. Reading *My Ántonia* from an intersectional perspective would, therefore, be a way of filling that gap. The method used for this study has been a qualitative content analysis to explore themes of gender, race, class and disability, and their interaction in relation to three characters analyzed in the novel. The analysis was divided into two parts in which the first part analyzed the three characters showing how different parts of their identity, such as their race and gender, interacted to create oppression and privilege. The second part of the analysis was to investigate how critical literacy could be brought into practice when reading the novel. The findings of the study were the following: The analysis of the characters through an intersectional perspective, resulted in showing how privilege and oppression was represented in the novel, and in such opened up for themes such as racism and gender inequality. Through these themes, which emerged by approaching the novel from an intersectional perspective, showed to be a way of practicing critical literacy.

Keywords: *My Ántonia*, intersectional perspective, reading, critical literacy.

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Introduction

My Ántonia (1918) is a novel that takes place in Nebraska. On the way to Nebraska, we meet Jim Burden whose point of view the story is told from. Jim is an orphan who leaves his home in Virginia and moves to Nebraska to live with his grandparents. From the perspective of intersectionality, the different aspect of Jim's identity, such as his gender, race and class, interact creating privilege. Jim is a middle-class man, he is American and has an education. On the same train to Nebraska is Ántonia Shimerda and her family, immigrants from Bohemia who hope for a better life in America. The different aspects of Ántonia's identity, on the other hand, interact creating oppression. Ántonia is a woman, an immigrant and poor. A third important character in the novel is Blind d'Arnault who, likewise Ántonia, is also oppressed. Arnault is mainly oppressed because of being black and disabled.

A society like the one in which we live, where some people are unjustly treated because of their race, gender, and class whilst others are privileged because of theirs, gives us reason to reflect on the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality provides tools for developing a greater understanding of how different categories, such as race, gender and class, interact to create oppression and privilege (Romero, 2018, p. 137). There are numerous studies that use intersectionality as an analytical tool within different research fields. However, there is a lack of pedagogical tools for implementing intersectionality in the classroom. Reading literature from an intersectional perspective would, therefore, be a way of addressing intersectionality in the classroom. Moreover, according to Graeske and Lundström (2016), using an intersectional perspective, when selecting texts, is in line with the democratic values that Skolverket [Swedish National Agency for Education] presents. (p.8). Choosing texts from an intersectional perspective implies choosing texts that represent diversity, and that as a teacher, you reflect on different power structures and consider aspects such as, for instance, gender, in your choice of texts (Graeske & Lindström 2016, p. 9).

This essay will also argue that approaching literature from an intersectional perspective, could be a way of bringing critical literacy into practice. To focus my research, I will ask the following questions:

- How can Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) be read from an intersectional perspective with the purpose of opening up for certain themes in the ESL classroom?
- How is reading the novel from this perspective a way of practicing critical literacy?

The analysis of *My Ántonia* will be informed by using intersectional theory and critical literacy as the theoretical frameworks for this essay. Intersectional theory, which aims at identifying how different social structures interact to create privilege and oppression, will be used to analyze three characters in the novel. The analysis of the characters will focus on the themes of gender, race, class and disability. The theory of critical literacy, which encourages readers to approach texts critically, will be used to look at how using an intersectional perspective could be a way of bringing critical literacy into practice. In order to demonstrate how using an intersectional approach could bring critical literacy into practice, the two theories have been combined. In addition to these theoretical frameworks, the curriculum for the upper secondary school and the English syllabus will also be used to connect the study with the practice of English teaching.

Theory & background

The theory and background section will form the basis on which the analysis will rest. This section will be divided into three parts where the first two parts will include explanations of concepts such as critical literacy and intersectionality along with research done in these fields. In the last section, the two theories will be combined taking into consideration what Skolverket and the English national syllabus say concerning matters relevant to the theories used for this study. The combining of the two theories with each other aims to demonstrate that, having students read *My Ántonia* from an intersectional perspective, could be a way of practicing critical literacy.

Critical literacy

By teaching critical literacy, teachers will help their students become aware of different social issues, such as racism and sexism (Wolk, 2003, p.2). According to Borsheim, Macaluso & Petrone (2014), critical literacy aims to illuminate ideologies of texts by examining issues of power, normativity, and representation (p.123). Moreover, it strives after social change with the purpose of positioning students as agents of that change (2014, p.131). The purpose of critical literacy is to make students aware of societal problems found in the world and to “prompt students to ask why and for what reason are things the way they are, to question who profits the most, and then to act on making the world a better place” (Beck, 2005; Comber & Nixon, 1999, as cited in Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 487). Consequently, educators need to teach students how to approach texts critically in order for students to ask such questions. Wolk (2003) argues that the purpose of critical literacy is to have students think from different perspectives, question different beliefs, and again, to take action in order to make the world a better place to live in. The author further discusses how critical literacy focuses on issues of power by asking who has power and who is denied it (p.102).

In addition, Janks (2014) argues that power can be understood by approaching texts critically in order to see how the text has been constructed and whose interest is being served (p.255). McLaughlin & DeVogd (2004); Hall & Piazza (2008) further add that approaching texts critically will lead to discussions such as who is privileged and who is not, and what is being valued or ignored in a text. Cervetti, Pardales and Damico (2001), therefore, propose several questions that students are encouraged to ask when critically approaching literature, such as ‘Whose interests are served by the dissemination of this text?’ and ‘Whose interests are not served?’ (As cited in Abednia, Izadinia, 2013, p.339). Having students ask these questions while doing critical literacy, will result in them becoming “open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of viewing text from a critical perspective” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 56).

In order to have students become engaged with critical literacy, many educators try to implement critical literacy in their classrooms. In a study, Matteson & Boyd (2017) present a framework that intends to help future English teachers address social issues in their classrooms and to have students approach texts using a critical lens. The framework consists of eight different components encouraged to consider while approaching texts. From the eight components, the ones that serve the purpose of this analysis are race, gender, and social class. Matteson & Boyd (2017) discuss how gender can be addressed by thinking about how it is represented by the author, and what norms and behaviors are presented in the text (p.35). Regarding social class, what could be discussed is the person's economic status and whether the person benefits or not from that position (p.36). When looking at race in a text, the authors recommend discussing discrimination and prejudice. Matteson & Boyd, 2017 further suggest the discussion of whiteness and white privilege when critically approaching texts (pp. 33-34). In conclusion, the authors encourage teachers to use this framework. They also encourage teachers to let their students add elements that they find relevant while critically reading texts (p.45).

Another study focuses specifically on gender equity with the purpose of showing how teachers can use literature to create critical classrooms. Kraver (2007) presents a framework which is very flexible and which "allows teachers to raise different issues and ideas that speak best to their audiences" (p.68). The aim with this framework is to have students' cognitive and affective responses to the material they work with by encouraging them to express their thoughts on the text content, but also their personal and emotional responses to the text. The framework is a five-step model which students go through while reading a text. The first level 'factual level' is about students seeing the facts the story presents, such as who are the characters and what position do they have in the text. Level two is the 'empathetic level' which is intended for students to connect with the text. In the third and fourth level (the analytical) and (applicative level) students should analyze different issues presented in the text and then apply it to real-world events. The last level (critical level) is about students valuing the text and examining it even further.

To summarize, Matteson & Boyd, 2017 suggest following this framework as it will develop students' ability to critically approaching texts. The studies presented overall aim to encourage teachers to practice critical literacy with their students by applying these frameworks. The next section that follows (2.2), will introduce the theory of intersectionality, themes such as *colorism*, studies using an intersectional approach, studies where the concept is implemented in classrooms, and lastly previous research on *My Ántonia*.

Intersectionality

There are many ways to define intersectionality. Davis (2008) defines intersectionality in the following way: “intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, intersectional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (p.68). The interaction between gender, race and other categories create both oppression and privilege and they are not isolated entities, but build on each other (Romero, 2018; Shields, 2008; Collins & Bigge, 2016). Romero (2018) further emphasizes the fact that intersectionality is not only about marginalized people; the concept also provides an understanding of privileged people (p.1).

The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw during the 1980s. The first use of the term was in Crenshaw's article “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics” in 1989, where she writes about how courts failed to recognize that black women experienced race and gender discrimination simultaneously (Romero, 2018; Davis, 2008). In her article, Crenshaw (1989) argues that feminist scholars and activists must use an intersectional approach and not consider gender and race as mutually exclusive categories. She illustrates her idea of using an intersectional approach for the experiences of Black women through an analogy of traffic:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination (1989, p.149).

Through this analogy, Crenshaw (1989) aims to highlight how different systems of oppression intersect and how it affects women in different ways. Intersectionality is, therefore, an important tool to consider in order to understand the multiple forms of oppression and discrimination. An important aspect of oppression and discrimination that Romero (2018) discusses is *colorism*. He states that “the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, class and nation are vital to understanding the ways in which colorism constructs gender” (p.90). For instance, black women, dark Latinas and Asians have throughout history been and are still depicted as unattractive because of going against the norms of female whiteness. They have also been considered aggressive and not good mothers. The author further explains that if women of color bear a resemblance to white women and have some European outlook, then they are likely to be characterized as exotic and attractive.

Another important aspect of colorism is how dark skin versus light skin is an indication of class. Romero (2018) takes Asian immigrants as an example by explaining that their dark skin is due to them working outside, whereas, in the USA, tanning in the summer is an indication of rich people vacationing (pp.89-90). It is also discussed how women, back in history, particularly black, Mexican and Indian women, worked together with their fathers and sons in the fields, or as laundresses or cooks. To receive privileges, you could not be poor, black, or immigrant (2018, p.85).

As previously discussed how some groups of women have been, and still are, viewed as aggressive and less attractive, black men experience the same. They are depicted negatively by society, especially by the media. Discussing men in general, Romero (2018) states that American men define their

masculinity more in relation to each other than to women. He explains that the comparison between men is evident when studying disability and masculinity. A disabled man does not fill the masculine characteristics of independence and strength (p.95). The author further says that disability is not completely shaped by gender: it includes the intersections of race, class, and sexuality (2018, p.95). Moreover, Romero (2018) discusses the impact disability has on gender identity, such as the time the impairment happened and the changes during different life situations. One example is about a laborer who after a job injury became disabled and could not work anymore. He was considered a failure by his family because of his disability (p.95).

Moving on to studies done using an intersectional approach, there are numerous studies that use intersectionality as an analytic tool. For instance, in a case study, McConnell, Todd, Odal & Shattell, (2016) analyze the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which is a feminist festival, through an intersectional perspective looking at issues of privilege and oppression. In another study, Sutherland & Feltey, 2017 explore themes such as race, gender and social class in movies about women using an intersectional approach. In a third study, Jabboury, Hasim & Satukananthan, (2017) focus on the interaction between race, gender, and hybridity in a play. In a fourth study, Norris, Erby & Zajicek, (2007) examine the extent to which the theory of intersectionality can be seen in the field of sociology. Through a case study, the authors analyze how common the issue of poverty is presented in introductory sociology textbooks. Although all these studies use an intersectional perspective to their studies, as this essay uses, the most relevant study for this essay is the study of Jabboury, Hasim & Satkunananthan (2017). In this study, the theme of alienation is explored in a play. The authors focus on how the overlapping of race, gender, and hybridity lead to oppression creating self-alienation of the protagonist. The findings of this study show that the interaction of race, gender, and hybridity create oppression driving the protagonist of the play to alienation. The study is relevant since it investigates how categories, such as race and gender interact with each other to create oppression, which is what will be done in the analysis of this essay, but by adding class and disability as well.

In spite of numerous studies using an intersectional approach, there is still a lack of pedagogical tools on teaching intersectionality and bringing the theory into the classroom (Case, 2017, p.7). Case's volume *Intersectional Pedagogy* (2017) is, however, an exception. In this volume, educators present different ways of implementing intersectionality in their classrooms. Case & Rios (2017) introduce us to their course of ten topical learning modules where students were required to read chapters from the chosen textbook and journal articles. The articles contributed positively to students' deeper understanding of intersectionality. By reading articles that addressed different themes on intersectionality, students explored how categories such as gender and race interacted with each other. In addition to articles and chapters that students read, they also viewed videos and read different stories and essays that were intended to connect their required readings with current events happening in the world (pp.83-91).

One of the assignments students carried out was a written task where they had to write about their personal privilege by thinking of one form of privilege and how it affects their lives as dominant group members (Case & Rios, 2017, pp. 94-95). In the paper instructions, it said that "your paper should reflect your ability to think critically about prejudice and privilege and successfully apply the concepts to real life and the course readings and materials" (2017, p.95). In summation, except teaching theory, educators aim to have students apply intersectionality to real life through different assignments, as the written task.

In another study, Hall (2017) introduces the concept of intersectionality to her students by having them read about it and its applications. The course on intersectionality also provided students with examples from real life. Various speakers were welcomed to discuss how social identities impact their lives which in turn "aided students' critical examination of the material while also understanding the lived experiences of the transections of oppressive and privileged identities" (Hall, 2017, p.157). Similarly, like the other educator, Hall (2017) also wishes to connect intersectionality with real-world events. The author further stresses that teaching intersectionality is a difficult task, and especially to younger students. One of the several assignments the teacher used on intersectionality was doing quote analysis.

Quote analysis was about selecting a quote on a particular topic by reading and discussing that in the classroom. The discussions often focused on students' thoughts and interpretations of the quotes, but also on the critical elements found in the quotes and their connection to different systems of oppression and privilege. In conclusion, educators make efforts on integrating intersectionality into their classrooms, despite it being difficult. The courses presented are very theoretical, but the educators do their best in trying to apply the theory to real life.

Regarding studies done on *My Ántonia*, there have been several studies which examine the novel from just one singular domain of the intersectional framework. The most common aspect that has been studied is the theme of gender, and how it is the main factor to oppression or privilege. Wussow (2005), for example, examines the connection between language and women's oppression and between language and gender identity in three of Cather's fictions. The author discusses how Cather's female characters are portrayed as foreigners and stresses that it is through language that the women are marginalized (p.52). Cather's male characters, on the other hand, are in power of the written language. Jim Burden is certainly a good example of that. He writes about Ántonia as if he owns her, and that is evident because of the title the novel receives (Wussow, 2015, p.54; Laird, 1992, p.248.; Irving, 1990, p.91).

Furthermore, Laird (1992) emphasizes the fact that although Ántonia is the main protagonist of the story, she does not occupy a similar position in the Nebraska community (p.247). Wussow (2005) further discusses how the female characters are excluded from their communities because of their physical appearance and their behavior; their appearance and behavior goes against the norms (p.52). Irving (1990) adds to this saying that Jim wants Ántonia to behave as a woman by being passive (p.98). Jim finds Ántonia to be masculine because of her physique and for her way of behaving. For instance, he finds her to be very noisy while eating and he considers it to be a male trait (Wussow, 2005, p.52). She is also criticized for the language she uses, which is considered inappropriate to her gender. Jim mocks her and her family for the way they speak and for the way they look (Lindemann, 1999, p.122; Wussow, 2005, p.53). It is further discussed that male characters want a language that is similar to English and that

can be codified. Jim and the other male characters find the native language of the females to be meaningless and incomprehensible (Wussow, 2005, pp. 53-54).

Moreover, Wussow (2005) also discusses how language and gender identity is connected. In contrast to what Jim thinks of *Ántonia's* speech, the Czech community praise and admire her for her speech. Her children respect her Czech speech because “her strength as a women, mother and story-teller comes from her power of speech” (p. 55). According to Wussow (2005) *Ántonia* has not been belittled by her Czech community because of her speech or ethnicity. It is through her language and her actions that her identity is shaped (2005, p.55). To conclude, although there are several studies which examine the novel from a gender perspective, there are however no existing studies which analyze the intersection of different identities such as gender and race.

Connecting critical literacy and intersectionality

- In relation to Skolverket

An important task that teachers have is to discuss different views, values and societal problems with their students, as well as the consequences of these (Skolverket, 2013, curriculum for the upper secondary school, p.11). In addition to this, the teaching of English should cover “subjects related to students’ education, and societal and working life; current issues [...]; relationships and ethical issues” (Skolverket, English syllabus for upper secondary school, 2011, under content of communication). Another important responsibility that the school has is to ensure that all students “have the ability to critically examine and assess what they see, hear and read in order to be able to discuss and take a view on different issues concerning life and values” (2013, p.9). In other words, Skolverket requires the development of critical literacy to actually happen within students.

By having students approach literature from an intersectional perspective, could be a way of bringing critical literacy into practice. As students read texts using a critical lens, they are likely to ask questions such as whose interests are served in the text and whose are not. Approaching a text through an

intersectional perspective could be to reflect over such questions. People who are privileged are those whose interest will be served in the text. Those who are oppressed are those whose interest will not be served. Therefore, bringing intersectionality into the classroom would give teachers the opportunity to meet Skolverket's requirement of discussing different societal problems with their students and possibly, practice critical literacy.

Furthermore, in the curriculum for the upper secondary school, it is stated that the school should "promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise" (2013, p.4). According to Walker (2003, p.991) understanding intersectionality is "an effort to see things from the worldview of others and not simply from our own unique standpoints" (As cited in Shields, 2008). Consequently, if students understand intersectionality, they can view things from other perspectives which might also lead to the understanding of other people and possibly empathizing with them. In addition, the English syllabus says that students should develop strategies to search for relevant information in texts and understand "perspectives and implied meaning" (2011, under reception, English 6). Through critical literacy, students would develop strategies, such as how to understand perspectives and implied meanings in texts, which is also a part of doing intersectional analysis. To conclude, based on what Skolverket communicates about teachers' responsibility to teaching critical literacy and aspects that would likely concern intersectionality, such as discussing social issues with students, the two theories seem to complete one another, which has also made it possible to combine the theories with each other. Approaching texts through an intersectional perspective signifies looking at how different power structures work together to create power and privilege, which in turn also signifies using your critical lens to question the content of the text.

Methodology

This study was primarily structured around a close reading of the novel *My Ántonia* (1918) with focus on approaching the novel through an intersectional perspective. The research method used for this study has been a qualitative content analysis. The analysis of the essay was further organized using a coding

method in order to highlight certain themes. This will be further explained in separate sections presented below; however, the selection of material will first be presented discussing the reason behind the choice of the novel and characters.

Selection of material

As mentioned above, this study used *My Ántonia* as its primary source of material. One of the main reasons behind the choice of this novel was because it provides excellent examples of different social issues found in society. Discussing different social issues values and beliefs in the classroom is a responsibility that teachers have and a requirement Skolverket has, which is a further reason to why this book was chosen. Furthermore, in the English syllabus, it says that students should read older literature, which is one more reason to why *My Ántonia* should be read. Another important reason for choosing this novel was because of the relevance seen in using an intersectional perspective to analyze the book. The relevance of analyzing the novel from an intersectional perspective was found in the three characters chosen for the analysis of this study. The characters chosen are Jim Burden, Ántonia Shimerda and Blind 'd' Arnault. The reason for choosing these characters has been because they are good examples in showing how privilege and oppression is represented in the novel. Through Jim, we find out how him being a white, middle- class man is a product of privilege. Blind 'd Arnault, on the contrary, is black, disabled and comes from a lower class. Last, but not least, we have Antonia who is a woman, an immigrant and poor. Analyzing these three characters has provided the analysis with three different perspectives on how the interaction between their different identity aspects create oppression and privilege. Additionally, Skolverket and other documents and material from the background section were used to provide examples of how critical literacy could be brought to practice by reading *My Ántonia* from an intersectional perspective.

Qualitative content analysis

This essay utilizes qualitative content analysis as its method. This research method has been widely used in different research fields, particularly within health studies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1277; Kondracki, Wellaman & Amundson, 2002, p.225). In comparison to quantitative content analysis, which approaches texts quantitatively by, for instance, counting words, qualitative content analysis “uncovers patterns, themes, and categories important to a social reality” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.5). Moreover, instead of the data being selected using random sampling, as with quantitative content analysis, samples from the data of qualitative content analysis are purposively selected in order to inform the research questions (2009, p.2). This research method aims at paying attention to themes providing knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p.2; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1278). In addition, Zhang & Wildemuth, (2009) give examples of where instances of themes might be expressed, such as in a sentence, phrase or even in a single word (p.3). The process of qualitative content analysis is to condense data into categories or themes by using inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning means that topics and themes emerge from the data, and that data is carefully examined and constantly compared by the researcher (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 2).

Coding

The analysis was organized using a coding method in order to highlight certain themes. Using coding method means dividing the data into categories which can be carried out “by selecting segments of text[...] or by highlighting the specific quotation to be coded” (Basir, 2003, p.149). As the study used an intersectional perspective, the themes were based on the aspects of gender, class, race, and disability. Since the novel had been read once before, the purpose was not to focus on the entire book, but on specific passages that discussed the themes being looked at, in relation to each character being analyzed. Hence, the close reading of the novel involved dividing the data into the categories of gender, race, class

and disability by selecting extracts of the text revolving around these themes. The extracts chosen were then used for the analysis of the characters and conclusions from the coded data were drawn.

Analysis

The analysis consists of two parts. The first part is doing an analysis of the three characters. The analysis of the three characters will be done through an intersectional perspective in order to see how they are products of the interaction between the different parts of their identities, looking specifically at gender, race, class and disability. The second part focuses on how reading the novel from an intersectional perspective is a way of practicing critical literacy. The first character to be analyzed is Jim Burden. In what follows, the interaction between the different part of his identity, such as his gender, race and class will be presented showing how they work together to create privilege.

Jim Burden

The fact that the *My Ántonia* is told from Jim's point of view, gives him a certain authority which he exerts on Ántonia and on the rest of the characters. Additionally, except that the novel is told from a male perspective, the characters, particularly Ántonia, is constantly viewed through Jim's gaze. Tyson (2006) refers to this as the *male gaze*. The concept of the male gaze can be seen in both movies and literature. Tyson (2006) describes the concept stating that "the man looks; the woman is looked at. And it is the one who looks who is in control" (p. 102). The male gaze is evident throughout the novel. Most importantly, the male gaze explains the high level of privilege Jim receives, mainly because of his gender, but also because of his class and race, which build on each other. One clear example of how Jim practices the male gaze is when he meets Ántonia after having spent some time apart when they have both grown up:

I remember how admiringly all the boys looked at her the night she first wore here velveteen dress, made like Mrs. Gardener's black velvet. She was lovely to see, with her eyes shining, and her lips always a little parted when she danced. That constant, dark color in her cheeks never changed. [...] I told her she must kiss me good-night. [...] "Why, Jim! You know you

ain't right to kiss me like that. I'll tell your grandmother on you!". "Lena Lingard lets me kiss her," I retorted, "and I'm not half as fond of her as I am fond you" (Cather, 1918, pp. 108-109).

Although Jim is fond of *Ántonia*, he still wishes to be superior to her by treating her as he pleases. In the example given, the attempted kiss can be a way of impressing the other boys who were looking at *Ántonia*, and he does this by justifying his actions saying that Lena let him kiss her. In addition to how men try to impress other men, Tyson (2006) states that: "a patriarchal man who feels he must have a beautiful woman on his arm in order to impress other people isn't interested in impressing other people. He's interested in impressing other men" (p.102). In like manner, Romero (2018) agreed upon this by saying that American men do not identify their masculinity in relation to women: they identify it in relation to each other (p.95).

There are many examples of how Jim shows the readers that because he is a man, he should be treated as one as well. For instance, Jim does not like when *Ántonia* uses a superior tone when she talks to him: "much as I liked *Ántonia*, I hated a superior tone that she sometime 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" (1918, p.24). Another example of Jim wishing to be considered superior to *Ántonia* is when he kills a snake that tries to attack her: "this was enough for *Antonia*. She liked me better from that time on, and she never took a supercilious air with me again. I had killed a big snake- I was now a big fellow" (1918, p.27). This example, likewise the previous ones, clearly presents the superiority of Jim, but also his masculinity and how he strongly aims to have *Ántonia* understand their gender difference.

Moreover, as Wussow (2005), Laird (1992) and Irving (1990) have discussed in their articles, the title alone of the novel is an indication of ownership that Jim exerts on *Ántonia*. Besides, Jim does not only show ownership towards *Ántonia*. The other female characters in the novel can also be seen as being "owned" by Jim. There is one part in the novel when Jim talks about how people in town have a negative

attitude towards immigrant women because of them being foreigners who can't speak English. He says that he is certain that he will live long enough to see "my country girls come into their own" (1918, p.98). Consequently, Jim does not only show possession towards Antonia; the other female characters are included as well.

Except Jim being a male, he is also white, has blue eyes and an education. As a result, the interaction between his gender, race, and class makes Jim privileged. Jim comes from a middle-class family and affords to study at the university. In the introduction of the novel, an unnamed narrator presents Jim in the following manner: "he is legal counsel for one of the great Western railways"[...]. His fresh color and sandy hair and quick changing blue eyes are those of a young man" (1918, pp.1-2). From the description of Jim, it becomes clear what social position he has. His job title is important because "If a young man with an idea can once get Jim Burden's attention [...], then the money which means action is usually forthcoming" (1918, p.2). This example clearly indicates that Jim occupies an important position since it requires effort to have his attention. Furthermore, the description of his physical appearance also emphasizes his whiteness which privileges him even more.

A clear example of the class difference between the Burden and the Shimerda family is when Antonia and her mother visit the Burdens during Christmas. Jim is annoyed because Mrs. Shimerda keeps commenting on everything she sees in the house wishing she too could own all those material things. He puts his anger on Antonia:

- Your mama, I said angrily, wants other people's things.
- Your grandfather is rich, she retorted fiercely. Why he not help my papa? (1918, p.45).

The given example clearly demonstrates that the Shimerda family is poor and cannot afford the things the Burdens have. In addition to this, in Antonia's and Jim's first meeting, Antonia wishes to give Jim a ring. However, Jim refuses it: "I did n't want her ring, and I felt there was something reckless and extravagant about her wishing to give it away to a boy she had never seen before" (1918, p.16). In this

example, it is clear that Jim finds it strange that she gives a ring to someone she barely knows. However, his refusal to accepting the ring can also be that he does not want the ring because it has no value and that he is only accustomed to receiving gifts from people of his class.

To summarize, Jim Burden is privileged in several ways. He is a man, white and has an established career. The different types of his identity categories, that is to say, his gender, race and class, interact by providing him with many life opportunities. *Ántonia*, on the contrary, has to overcome many obstacles and is far from privileged as Jim is. In the next section, *Ántonia* will be analyzed showing how the interaction between her gender, race, and class create oppression.

Ántonia Shimerda

The first description of *Antonia's* appearance, which is very much in contrast to Jim's sandy look, is when Jim recalls on what the conductor with whom *Ántonia* and Jim traveled had said about her eyes:

I remembered what the conductor had said about her eyes. They were big and warm and full of light like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks, she had a glow of rich, dark color. Her brown hair was curly and wild-looking (Cather, 1918, p. 14).

In his book, Romero (2018) brought up *colorism* discussing how black women, Latinas and Asians had been considered unattractive because of going against the norms of female whiteness. He further explained that if a woman had a bit of European outlook, then she would most likely be characterized as exotic and attractive (pp.89-90). This is well coupled with what Jim thinks of *Ántonia*. He finds her attractive and exotic because of her wild-looking.

Romero (2018) further discussed how dark versus light skin denotes class. He gave an example of Asian immigrants and Americans stating that dark skin of Asian immigrants comes from laboring outdoors, and the light skin from Americans means vacationing and leisure time (p.90). In the novel, *Ántonia* works full-time in the fields with her brother: “she was out in the fields from sun-up until sun-down” (Cather, 1918, p.62). This shows that because of her family’s bad economic conditions, *Ántonia* must work in order to maintain her family.

As much as Jim finds *Ántonia* attractive, he starts criticizing her for looking and behaving like a man, especially when she starts working out in the fields. In two of the articles on *My Ántonia*, the authors argued that *Ántonia* differs from the typical traditional female because of her physical appearance and behavior (Laird, 1992; Wussow, 2005). *Ántonia* appearing more like a man in terms of her physique is evident when she works in the fields. After *Ántonia*’s fifteenth birthday, Jim goes to visit her and sees her coming along with her horses:

She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor’s. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. One sees that draft-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries (1918, p.60).

As the example above illustrates, *Ántonia* appears as a hard worker who spends many hours outdoors working, which Jim finds to be inappropriate to her gender as these are tasks “a girl ought not to do” (1918, p. 62). Furthermore, the discussion of *colorism* can be added to the example, since it clearly explains how *Ántonia*’s arms and throat “burned as a sailor’s” is due to her being outdoors working. This, in turn, speaks for her social class. *Ántonia*’s life is different from Jim’s. She does not have the money he has, nor does she have an education like him. She is simply not privileged as Jim is, and she tries to explain that to him: “if I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us” (1918, p.69).

Another important aspect of the given example on *Ántonia* working outdoors is that it depicts how Jim compares *Antonia* to peasant women and their necks looking similar to draft-horses. By this description, *Ántonia* is positioned very low in the class hierarchy, but most importantly, she is described as less than human. Jim describes *Ántonia* in a way that marginalizes not only her, but also all women who are peasants.

Furthermore, *Ántonia* is viewed as behaving and using language inappropriately to her gender. Wussow (2005) stated in her article that Cather's female characters are portrayed as foreigners and that is it through their language that these women are marginalized (p.52). *Ántonia*'s behavior and language are constantly commented by Jim. He finds her talking like a "man" and "jabbering" Bohunk. According to Jim, there is a difference in the way *Ántonia* and another female character, Lena, talk. Jim thinks Lena talks beautifully whereas about *Ántonia*, he thinks that even if she learned to speak English "There was always something impulsive and foreign in her speech" (1918, p. 134).

In addition, Wussow (2005) stated that Cather's female characters are marginalized because of their language, which can be coupled with how Jim judges *Ántonia*'s speech for being impulsive and foreign. This can further be explained by the fact that *Ántonia* is an immigrant in America. In such case, *Ántonia*'s speech is defined by her race and class, which interact to create oppression. *Ántonia* is further judged by possibly resembling her mother when she grows up. Jim finds Mrs. Shimerda to be boastful: "was she going to grow up boastful like her mother?" (1918, p. 61). This clearly indicates that not only does Jim have prejudices against *Ántonia*, but against her family as well.

To summarize, the interaction between *Ántonia*'s gender, class and race work to create oppression. *Ántonia* is mostly oppressed because of her race and class. Since she goes against the gender norms, she is mostly criticized for not behaving and looking like a woman, rather than oppressed because of being a woman. However, there are instances in the novel when Jim looks down at *Ántonia* because she is a woman and he a man, which have been brought up in the analysis of Jim. Similarly, as *Ántonia*, Blind'd Arnault is considered a foreigner and is for most of the part, racially oppressed. In the following section,

Blind 'd Arnault will be analyzed, just as done with the other two characters, looking at the interaction between his gender, race and class, but by adding another one: disability. Also, since this character is briefly presented in the novel, nonetheless considered important for the analysis of this essay, the analysis of him will not be as extended as the other ones.

Blind'd Arnault

Blind 'd Arnault is a pianist who comes to town to give a concert. At the age of three, he becomes blind and his mother is ashamed of him: "his mother [...] concluded that her blind baby was "not right" in his head, and she was ashamed of it" (Cather, 1918, p.90). Although she loves him, he is considered ugly. Romero (2018) stated that disability is not completely shaped by gender only: it is also shaped by race, class and sexuality. The author had further discussed the impact disability had on gender identity. He gave an example of a laborer who was injured at work and could not work anymore. Because he could not work anymore, he was considered a failure (2018, p.95). Similarly, because Arnault is blind, he is considered to be disgraceful.

Arnault comes from a low class. His mother used to work as a laundress for a wealthy family. It was in that house that he was inspired to play the piano as there was one family member who used to play it (1918, pp.90-92). When Arnault enters the scene in which he will perform, he is described by Jim in the following way:

He was a heavy, bulky mulatto, on short legs, and he came tapping the floor in front of him with his gold-headed cane. His yellow face was lifted in the light, with a show of white teeth, all grinning, and his shrunken, papery eyelids lay motionless over his blind eyes. [...] It was the soft, amiable negro voice [...] with the note of docile subservience in it. He had the negro head, too; almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool. He would have been repulsive if his face had not been so kindly and happy (1918, p.90).

The way Arnault is described clearly shows how he is discriminated by his race. Jim comments on his ‘negro’ voice and head. He further comments on how he would have looked unpleasant if he had not been as happy as he is. In other words, the discrimination towards Arnault is primarily due to him being black and disabled. Therefore, his race and disability are what mostly make him oppressed. Although he comes from a poor family, his profession as a pianist is, nevertheless, a respectable profession and he plays good music. Jim comments on his music saying that he plays fiercely and unpleasantly, but the music is still wonderful and real: “he was always a negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully. As piano playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music, it was something real” (1918, p.92). Arnault’s music is considered to be good and Jim himself says this. However, his way of playing is described as “barbarously” and “abominable”. Him playing “barbarously” is well coupled with what Romero (2018) said about black men being considered dangerous. Arnault is not necessarily considered dangerous, but he possesses traits that come from prejudices held against black people. This becomes even more clear when Jim says: “to hear him, to watch him, was to see a negro enjoying himself as only a negro can” (1918, p.92). In this example, like the other ones illustrated, Arnault is once again called a “negro” and once again discriminated because of his race. Further prejudices hold against Arnault and black people is noted as Jim comments on how Arnault enjoys himself as only a “negro” can. In summary, the aspects of race and disability, in comparison to gender and class, are what most matter to how Arnault is portrayed in the novel. It is through his race and disability that he is oppressed.

Practicing critical literacy through the reading of *My Ántonia*

As stated in the section “connecting critical literacy and intersectionality” (section 2.3), having students approach literature from an intersectional perspective, could be a way of bringing critical literacy into practice. Skolverket (2013) clearly states that teachers should discuss different social issues with

their students and the consequences of these (p.11). As intersectionality is about how different categories, such as gender and race interact to create oppression and privilege, reading a text from an intersectional perspective will have issues, such as racism and gender inequality emerge. Considering these themes while critically approaching texts, students will be motivated to ask questions such as those presented by Abednia & Izadinia (2013) in the section of “critical literacy” (section 2.1). Two examples of those questions were ‘whose interests are served by the dissemination of this text?’ and ‘whose interests are not served?’. Using an intersectional lens while reading a text would signify answering these questions by considering, for instance, how gender, race and class are represented in the text. If answering the two questions above about *My Ántonia*, the answer to the first question would be that privileged people’s interests are served, particularly white men, like Jim himself. The other question would speak for the unprivileged characters in the novel, which are Ántonia and Blind’d Arnault. To motivate the answers to these questions, would be to consider the representation of gender, race, and class in the novel. In previous research on critical literacy, Matteson & Boyd (2017) presented a framework with the purpose of having teachers help their students to critically approach texts. Themes such as race, gender and class were given as examples to consider when critically reading a text. For instance, when discussing gender, one could look at how it is represented in the text, as well as what norms and behaviors are presented (2017, p. 35). When looking at how gender is represented in *My Ántonia*, we can discuss how Jim being a man, receives more privileges than Ántonia. Regarding class and race, Matteson & Boyd (2017) suggested to consider the economic status of a person and if that person benefits from it or not, and topics such as discrimination and prejudice (pp. 33-36). In the novel, the economic status of Ántonia could be discussed and how she does not benefit from that position in comparison to Jim, who benefits from his economic status. When discussing race, Blind’d Arnault would be the best example to bring up, as he is racially discriminated by Jim. In addition to this, Wolk (2013) stated that teaching critical literacy is a way for students to become aware of social issues, such as racism (p.2). Racism is evident in *My Ántonia*, and would therefore be a good example to discuss with students.

To summarize, reading *My Ántonia* while considering racism, for instance, would be a way of practicing critical literacy. As stated in the section “critical literacy”, the theory aims at having students become aware of different social issues and to have them ask questions, such as why things are the way they are, who is privileged vs not. (Beck, 2005; Comber & Nixon, 1999, as cited in Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 487). Reading *My Ántonia* will have students become aware of societal issues by having them put on their critical lens. Furthermore, Wolk (2003) argued that one of the purposes of critical literacy is to have students think from different perspectives (p.2). In addition, reading *My Ántonia* by trying to understand intersectionality is “an effort to see things from the worldview of others and not simply from our own unique standpoints” (Walker, 2003, p.991, as cited in Shields, 2008). Seeing things from the worldview of others would be a way of thinking from different perspectives, and in such, a way of practicing critical literacy.

Conclusion

Despite there being numerous studies that use intersectionality as an analytic tool, there are however few studies on how to implement the theory into the classroom. Reading *My Ántonia* from an intersectional perspective could, therefore, be a way of bringing the theory into the classroom and in such, fill that gap. The purpose of this paper has been to approach *My Ántonia* from an intersectional perspective in attempt to open up for discussion of certain themes. In addition, it also sought to explore how reading the novel from an intersectional perspective could bring critical literacy into practice. Therefore, the theory of intersectionality and critical literacy were combined in order to demonstrate how critical literacy could be practiced through reading the novel. The first part of the analysis consisted of analyzing the three characters by looking at how they are products of the interaction between the different parts of their identities, focusing specifically at the categories of gender, race, class and disability. The reason behind the choice of the three characters has been because they provide excellent examples on showing how oppression and privilege is represented in the novel. This has also been one of the main reasons

for choosing the novel for this study: to look for different social issues presented in the book. One of Skolverket's requirement is that teachers should discuss different societal problems with their students and the consequences of those. Reading the novel from an intersectional perspective by analyzing the three characters, has shown to be a way of opening up for discussion of themes such as racism, classism and gender inequality. The findings of the study showed that the interaction between the different categories created privilege in Jim and oppression in *Ántonia* and Blind'd Arnault. Jim is provided with many opportunities since he is a man, white and has an established career. Moreover, he is the one whose point of view the story is told from, which in turn gives him power to control the written word. *Ántonia*, on the other hand, receives no benefits since she is a woman, immigrant and poor. Blind'd Arnault is likewise *Ántonia* also oppressed, and he is mainly oppressed for being black and disabled. Reading *My Ántonia* from an intersectional perspective by considering themes such as racism and gender inequality, has shown to be a way of practicing critical literacy. When critically reading texts, students are likely to ask questions such as who profits the most in the text, who is left out and for what reasons is that. Questions as these could be answered by considering factors that make certain persons receive more privileges than others, such their gender, race and class.

To conclude, the limitation of this study is that close readings and content analysis are inherently subjective, which means that someone else might draw different conclusions from the same primary text. Furthermore, since this study has only looked at one primary text, the findings might also be transferable to working with other texts. This could further be something to do future research on. Also, the approach used to working with intersectionality is only one among many other approaches, which means that for further research, one could apply other approaches to conduct this study. Lastly, since the study is purely theoretical, we do not know how this might work in practice in the classroom.

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