

Gender Performance in *Walden*

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1. Introduction

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* from 1854 has long occupied a central place in American literary and cultural history, celebrated both as a testament to individual self-reliance and as a critique of the rapidly industrializing society of the mid-nineteenth century. As a foundational text in American literature, environmentalism, and philosophy, it is widely celebrated for advocating a life of simplicity, self-reliance, and a close, meditative connection with nature. Written during Thoreau's experiment in living alone by Walden Pond and documenting his simple, self-reliant living, the book weaves together reflections on nature, politics, community, and the moral responsibilities of the individual. Over time, scholars have interpreted *Walden* through numerous thematic lenses: its meditations on race and abolitionism, its articulation of the American ideal of self-reliance, its subtle commentary on class and labor, and its relationship to Thoreau's later thinking about civil disobedience. The text has been claimed across ideological lines, praised by environmentalists, individualists, conservatives, and progressives alike, precisely because it resists being placed neatly on one side of the political spectrum.

Among these many discussions, gender stands out as an especially interesting discussion since the book is deeply embedded in nineteenth-century assumptions about masculinity, domesticity, and social roles. *Walden* enacts traditional gender norms through its emphasis on rugged individualism and male self-fashioning, while it simultaneously also quietly disrupts them through moments where Thoreau performs tasks coded as feminine, reimagines domestic labor, or positions himself outside mainstream expectations of manhood. In a contemporary context where gender identity and performance are increasingly visible and contested topics, revisiting *Walden* offers an opportunity to explore how literary texts both reproduce and destabilize cultural constructions of gender.

This article will therefore investigate *Walden* through gender theory, asking how Thoreau's self-presentation both aligns with and departs from conventional gender roles, and what this means for our understanding of the text today. My approach begins with a theoretical framework grounded in Judith Butler's conception of gender as performative, providing the analytical tools

necessary to interpret Thoreau's self-fashioning within broader cultural scripts. I will then survey existing scholarship on gender in *Walden* to situate my argument in ongoing academic conversations. Finally, I will extend the discussion by comparing Thoreau's gender performance to that of the protagonists in the newly released film *One Battle After Another*, examining how both works negotiate gendered expectations in their respective cultural moments.

2. Gender Theory

Gender is a concept that constantly gets redefined. Gender is a way of categorizing people and is a part of a structural system, often mainly based on the binaries between male and female, where femininity is defined in part by not being masculine and vice versa. First, gender was used as an identity based on a biological sex, until feminist theory pointed out the socially constructedness of the word (Kiesling 21-22). Later, Scott Kiesling (2019) defined gender in *Language, Gender, and Sexuality* as an ideological system, a shared conceptual system for organizing the world that not everyone believes is true or valuable but is widely shared and therefore has real-world consequences in terms of behavior. The system involves the individual, their habits, their feelings, and how they experience the world, but it is also involved in the more collective human aspects, such as economies, nations, and institutions like families. It is an aspect that imbues itself through most aspects of our lives (Kiesling 23).

Judith Butler (1993) agrees that gender has nothing to do with biology and stresses the constructedness of the word (Butler 1-3). Butler presents us with *queer theory*, which investigates how gender and sexuality are represented and defined through language and culture, and thereby how the gendered and sexual categories we know today have been shaped. The central focus within queer theory is that gender is something one *does* and not something one *is*, because one's gender does not exist in advance but comes into being through one's actions in relation to others. Our gendered identity exists only through repeated acts, gestures, bodily stylizations, speech acts, etc. By doing certain things, we are bringing our gender into being because other people recognize those actions as doing that gender (Butler 8-12). But gender is not something one 'does' freely. It is a set of repeated norms that by repetition reinforce these constructed norms where heterosexuality is seen as neutral (Butler 9-11). Bodies that fail to 'materialize' in normative ways, whether due to gender variance, disability, race, etc., help define the intelligible norm by their exclusion (Butler 3). Butler argues that gender is a system of signals that count as femininity and masculinity, and anyone can be masculine or feminine if they use the right performative formulas. They contend that gender is something that can be 'put on' by anyone, male or female. Therefore,

all things men do are not masculine, and all things masculine are not done by men. This also opens the possibility of disruption and resignification of gender (Butler 239-242).

One of the most fruitful areas to explore gender is the investigation of how people use language to express gender, how a person's gender affects the choices they make in how they speak, and how their talk is received (Kiesling 653). This will be further elaborated in the analysis of *Walden*.

3. The Study of Gender in *Walden*

In *A Historical Guide on Henry David Thoreau*, Dana D. Nelson examines in "Thoreau, Manhood, and Race", how *Walden* participates in nineteenth-century cultural constructions of masculinity, arguing that Thoreau crafts a model of 'representative isolation' that responds to and critiques dominant ideals of white, middle-class manhood (Nelson 86-88). Nelson proposes that Thoreau's withdrawal to Walden Pond rejects the 'quiet desperation' of socially prescribed masculine roles: economic competition, public productivity, and patriarchal domestic authority (Nelson 62-63), while simultaneously reaffirming certain aspects of masculine autonomy (Nelson 73). She situates Thoreau's experiment within broader racialized discourses of national identity, showing that his vision of self-reliance relies on cultural privileges connected to whiteness (Nelson 69-70). For gender studies of *Walden*, Nelson's chapter frames Thoreau's retreat not as apolitical solitude but as an intervention in the cultural performance of manhood, offering a lens through which to analyze how gender norms shape, and are shaped by, Thoreau's self-fashioning.

Many other scholars have studied gender in *Walden* and one of them is Lauren Dassow Walls who wrote "Walden as Feminist Manifesto". She begins by pointing out that *Walden* is a particularly masculine text. Thoreau opens the book almost boasting about his manly pioneer achievements such as escaping society, building his own house and plowing and planting the ground (Walls 521). But could *Walden* be seen as a feminist manifesto? She continues to present three ways in which *Walden* could encourage a feminist reading. Firstly, as he escapes civilization, he strips away the artifact of society and eliminates the bulk of men's labor and the structures that govern women's work. Thoreau's underlying philosophy turns the basis for gender conventions into rubble, and the binary division between social and natural has given away, and men and women are equally free (Walls 522-523). Second, Thoreau assumes the dual role of both housebuilder and housekeeper, which creates a gender fluidity. Lastly, in Thoreau's gender construction the female is prior and gives rise to the male. The feminine nature is the condition for the existence of the masculine and society (Walls 524-525).

Building on the article above, Rachael DeWitt's newly released essay "Thoreau, Gender and the Ecology of Housework" puts forward a radical view of Thoreau as the 'queer auntie-social', a figure whose domestic practices and gender performance disrupt the nineteenth-century expectations of hegemonic masculinity. DeWitt argues that although *Walden* has traditionally been read through its overtly masculine discourses the text devotes a surprising amount of attention to housework, frugality, caregiving, and emotional responsiveness, all traits culturally coded as feminine in Thoreau's time (DeWitt 203-204). DeWitt presents a biographical justification for situating Thoreau with the feminine tradition of domestic writing (DeWitt 208). Thoreau was not a hegemonic masculine man. He had no wife, kids, house, property and was not living up to the expectations of engineering something, which was considered 'unmanly' by his contemporaries, who saw his behavior as more feminine coded (DeWitt 205). By highlighting Thoreau's meticulous descriptions of cleaning, cooking, hosting, and tending to the nonhuman inhabitants of the pond, DeWitt positions him within a lineage of domestic writing typically associated with women, or with figures such as spinsters who created kinship networks not through reproduction but through care, stewardship, and frugal relationality. Based on Donna Haraway's theory on oddkin, in which humans, animals, and environments are bound together through practices of attention, maintenance, and ecological reciprocity, Thoreau's household at Walden becomes a site of queer kin-making (DeWitt 206-207). All this together produces a genderqueer mode of self-fashioning that unsettles the boundaries between masculine independence and feminine nurturance.

4. Analysis & Discussion

In the following analysis, I examine how *Walden* performs and disrupts nineteenth-century gender norms by tracing the masculine- and feminine-coded behaviors that shape Thoreau's self-presentation.

Throughout *Walden*, we see many examples of Thoreau performing male-coded behavior, and as mentioned by Walls, Thoreau begins this book by presenting his pioneer activities. "When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them. I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only" (Thoreau 5). Here Thoreau presents himself as this rugged, self-reliant builder. Thoreau builds his own cabin, cuts his own wood, and plows and plants the ground. He almost boasts about his manly outdoor activities and accomplishments, and performs the kind of pioneer-masculinity associated with frontier individualism. This echoes the nineteenth-century ideal of the self-made man and the masculine ideal of mastery over tools and landscape, with Thoreau presenting himself in accordance with the

ideals associated with the traditional American manhood. Another example of Thoreau performing masculine-coded behavior is seen when surveying, measuring, and cataloguing in “The Pond in Winter”: “I fathomed it easily with a code-line and a stone weighing about a pound and a half, and could tell accurately when the stone left the bottom, by having to pull so much harder before the water got underneath to help me” (Walden 192) and “The Ponds”: “It is clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres” (Walden 121). Here Thoreau measures pond depth line by line, performs geometrical calculations, and presents himself as a rational empirical observer. Surveying was a masculinized profession, tied to property, ownership, engineering, and nation-building, which fit with the masculine ideal of that time. Also, Thoreau’s stance that a man should avoid unnecessary social ties, marriage expectations, and economic entanglements: “I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately” (Walden 65) and “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” (Walden 65) shows stoic independence and withdrawal, which reflects nineteenth-century masculine ideals of autonomy, rationality and emotional restraint.

Throughout *Walden*, we also see a lot of male-coded language. Scott Kiesling (2007) argues in “Men, Masculinities, and Language” that in every society there are a ‘cultural discourses of masculinity’ that comprise hegemonic masculinity. Qualities and practices that people value, desire, and strive for. He presents us with four cultural discourses of masculinity in USA: 1) *Gender Difference*, 2) *Heterosexism*, 3) *Dominance*, and 4) *Male Solidarity* (Kiesling 657-658) and especially dominance, which is the identification of masculinity with dominance, authority, or power; to be a man is to be strong, authoritative, and in control, is seen throughout *Walden* and reflected in the language. Thoreau boasts about his manly outdoor activities and accomplishments (Walden 5), which shows that he is a powerful, strong man in control. Thoreau often frames himself as intellectually superior, boasting subtly about his mastery of reading, knowledge, and philosophical insight (Walden 75-76). He often references other literary works and diminishes others who are not as well-read and intellectual as he is: “Yet I never, by any manoeuvring, could get him to take the spiritual view of things; the highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate” (Walden 104). Here, he compares the woodchopper to an animal, and on another page, he wonders if he is as ignorant as a child (Walden 103), stating his own superiority. His intellectuality and experience also legitimize and gives him the authority to educate people on how to live their lives the best way possible, as seen in “Baker Farm”, where he positions himself as a teacher that knows best and tells a family man, his ‘student’, how he should live his life to achieve the best, simple, fulfilling, deliberate life (Walden 140-141). And also, Thoreau’s choice to live deliberately (Walden 65), wanting to go against his own nature

of desires he is socialized to strive for (Walden 150), shows that he is strong and in control. All these examples align with the discourse of dominance, showing that Thoreau wants to assert himself as superior to other people. At the same time, Thoreau consistently draws on the discourse of gender difference by depicting men and women as opposites. Nature is feminized and described as 'she' (Walden 189), while the words 'man' and 'he' are often used in relation to society and civilization (Walden 7), which are represented as complete opposites of each other in the book.

Even though he did not perform masculinity in accordance with mid-nineteenth-century gender norms, his actions still align with the traditional masculine ideals of American pioneer culture. This could fit with Nelson's article as Thoreau redefining masculinity at his time, criticizing some of the civilized masculine ideas such as having a wife, kids, and participating in the competing industry-embedded society, and takes it back to the beginning and connecting with nature. While criticizing some aspects of civilization, he still performs and thus reinforces some of the masculine ideals at the time, such as the self-made man.

However, while Thoreau's self-reliant labor and empirical surveying clearly draw on masculine-coded ideals of independence and mastery, limiting Thoreau to masculine self-reliance risks overlooking the large portion of *Walden* devoted to domestic work, which also reveals a different dimension of his gender performance. As the narrative shifts from building the cabin to maintaining it, Thoreau adopts practices traditionally associated with feminine domesticity. Fully aligned with DeWitt's arguments, Thoreau describes sweeping, dusting, cleaning, organizing his cellar, baking, and tending to guests, which, for example, is seen in the chapter "Economy". Here, Thoreau goes into depth with his baking journey, learning how to bake the best bread and describing the procedure and ingredients in detail (Walden 45-46). Another example is seen in the chapter "Visitors": "If one guest came he sometimes partook of my frugal meal, and it was no interruption to conversation to be stirring a hasty pudding, or watching the rising and maturing of a loaf of bread in the ashes, in the mean while" (Walden 98). Here Thoreau describes how he is tending to his guest and making sure his guest is comfortable by making them a home-cooked meal. These tasks are explicitly feminine-coded forms of labor in nineteenth-century domestic ideology. Thoreau also hosts guests and offers emotional labor, as seen in "Visitors":

I had more cheering visitors than the last. Children come aberrying, railroad men taking a Sunday morning walk in clean shirts, fishermen and hunters, poets and philosophers, in short, all honest pilgrims, who came out to the woods for freedom's sake, and really left the village behind, I was ready to greet with,—

”Welcome, Englishmen! Welcome, Englishmen!” for I had had communication with that race (Walden 106).

Thoreau is performing the role of a host, embracing a feminized role. He welcomes a stream of guests, offers them conversation, cheer, and companionship, activities coded as feminine domestic labor in his era. While undertaking the role of host, Thoreau only serves frugal meals or no meals at all to his houseguests (Walden 98), which could be considered a breach of conventional expectations for feminine hospitality. This act still aligns with DeWitt’s arguments about seeing Thoreau as a frugal housekeeper, a feminized figure. In continuation of this argument, Thoreau constantly emphasizes careful consumption, reuse, repair, and resource-based management, which was culturally tied to feminine domestic responsibility for the household economy. This is seen already in the first chapter of *Walden*, when he carefully presents us with his costs illustrated almost as a spreadsheet, explaining what was cheap and expensive, and what it was used for (Walden 43-45). Beyond his houseguests, Thoreau also offers sentimentality and care toward animals, as seen in “Brute Neighbors”, where he plays with and feeds a mouse that has moved into his cabin (Walden 153), and in “Winter Animals”, when he describes that he feels pity towards the hares (Walden 189). He expresses worry, joy, affection, and playfulness with the animals at the pond throughout the book, and these emotional, nurturing attitudes were feminized cultural values.

Thoreau also uses a lot of Women’s Language, which is a term drawn from one of the earliest and most cited works on language and gender, Robin Lakoff’s book *Language and Woman’s Place* (1973). Lakoff gives a list of the alleged features of Women’s Language, including things like empty adjectives (darling, cute, lovely), tag questions (It’s hot out, isn’t it?), or using hyperbole and exaggeration (Lakoff 51-54). Although the book itself provides no actual data from speakers and that other studies have found no clear support for any of the features being used more frequently by women than by men, their use by drag queens as part of their gender performance show the style is recognizable as feminine and can be used as a way to invoke feminine performance (Fought and Eisenhauer 178-179). Thoreau’s use of Women’s Language is especially perceived when describing nature. An example of empty adjectives is seen when he describes the pickerel of *Walden*:

I am always surprised by their rare beauty, as if they were fabulous fishes, they are so foreign to the streets, even to the woods, foreign as Arabia to our Concord life. They possess a quite dazzling and transcendent beauty which separates them by a wide interval from the cadaverous cod and haddock whose fame is trumpeted in our streets (Walden 191).

In the excerpt, Thoreau uses words such as ‘fabulous’, ‘dazzling’, and ‘transcendent’ to describe the beauty of the pickerels in Walden Pond. He could have used more neutral words, such as ‘remarkable’, ‘shining’, or ‘great or uncanny beauty’, to describe the pickerels. Furthermore, Thoreau continues to elaborate on the color of the fish and cannot decide on the perfect color to describe them by, which Lakoff (1973) in *Language and Women’s Place* describes as a being typical feminine coded language, where men would not care to go into as much detail and precisely name the color, because it is irrelevant to the real world (Lakoff 49). Another example of this is seen later in the book when describing the ice of Walden Pond: “Like the water, the Walden ice, seen near at hand, has a green tint, but at a distance is beautifully blue, and you can easily tell it from the white ice of the river, or the merely greenish ice of some ponds, a quarter of a mile off” (Walden 199). Here he again goes into great detail about the colors of Walden Pond. Sometimes it has a green tint and other times it is blue, and then he proceeds to compare it to other colors of other ponds, which, according to Lakoff, a ‘man’ would see as exaggerating the importance of color and therefore female-coded language. Thoreau also uses hyperbole and exaggeration throughout the book: “The first sparrow of spring! The year beginning with younger hope than ever!” (Walden 208), “An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” (Walden 65), and “It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself. Talk of a divinity in man!” (Walden 8). In all these examples, Thoreau uses exclamation marks to further emphasize and exaggerate his statement. The clearest example of them is the last, where Thoreau uses hyperbole by juxtaposing slavery and divinity to show how far man is from divinity, so this is a clearly exaggerated statement, and a claim not meant to be taken literally.

Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a set of repeated acts rather than a stable identity, I treat Thoreau’s domestic routines, ecological practices, and social withdrawal as forms of gender performance that both align with and challenge the expectations of manhood. Thoreau has both shown masculine traits such as self-reliance and empirical mastery, and feminized practices of housekeeping, care, and frugality. These binaries I now attempt to blur together by turning to queer-coded gestures in *Walden*. Gestures that are gender-nonconforming or norm-resistant performances. First of all, Thoreau rejects heteronormative masculine life stages. He does not marry, does not establish a patriarchal household, and does not perform reproductive futurism, which aligns with the ‘spinster’ or ‘auntie-social’ queer readings. Thoreau is also blending the masculine and feminine roles. He simultaneously performs the masculine-coded role of pioneer, hermit, and woodsman and the feminine-coded role of housekeeper, nurturer, and caretaker, and

this hybridity disrupts nineteenth-century binary gender norms. Furthermore, Thoreau also reconfigures the household into an interspecies kin network by caring for animals, which DeWitt also points out. Thoreau's 'household' includes nonhuman beings, forming 'oddkin' rather than traditional lineage-based kinship. This could be considered queer-coded because it rejects the traditional family. In this example:

My "best" room, however, my withdrawing room, always ready for company, on whose carpet the sun rarely fell, was the pine wood behind my house. Thither in summer days when distinguished guests came, I took them, and a priceless domestic swept the floor and dusted the furniture and kept the things in order (Walden 98).

Thoreau performs a feminized role, but in a queer way. Even though he does not have a 'real' drawing room, he still imagines himself hosting guests and caring for his space. This is a feminine-coded activity. But because his room is the woods and his housekeeper is the wind, he is reworking the feminine role, queering domesticity by expanding it beyond human norms and refusing the masculine-coded role of patriarch and house-owner. By personifying the wind as a housekeeper, he extends the household beyond the cabin and into the ecosystem. And by hosting his guests outside, this also shows a critique of materialism and social conventions at his time. As Nelson's chapter shows, Thoreau also refuses representative manhood by choosing 'representative isolation' and therefore choosing solitude rather than citizen manhood. And his refusal to be a representative man places him outside normative masculinity, which was seen as unmanly and suspect by his contemporaries and aligns with queer theory. Thoreau also draws on queer-coded language of irony and exaggeration—characteristics queer theorists would later associate with camp and often adopted by drag queens when performing on stage (Fought and Eisenhauer 179). We see an example of this when Thoreau is talking about welcoming visitors:

I had more cheering visitors than the last. Children come aberrying, railroad men taking a Sunday morning walk in clean shirts, fishermen and hunters, poets and philosophers, in short, all honest pilgrims, who came out to the woods for freedom's sake, and really left the village behind, I was ready to greet with,— "Welcome, Englishmen! Welcome, Englishmen!" for I had had communication with that race (Walden 106).

Thoreau is performing the role of a host and even exaggerates the role for comic effect. “Welcome, Englishmen!” is a deliberately theatrical greeting. He is acting the part of a host, embracing a feminized role but doing it with humor, self-awareness, and irony. The ironic greeting “Welcome, Englishmen!” shows that he is self-consciously performing this role rather than ‘naturally’ inhabiting it. This aligns with Butler’s view on gender performance: he does hospitality, rather than being feminine. Taken together, these examples reveal how *Walden* becomes a site where gender is not only performed but actively reconfigured, opening space for alternative ways of living and relating beyond the normative household.

4.1 One Battle After Another

To further place *Walden* within a current context, I will now turn to the film *One Battle After Another* (2025). Throughout the film, we follow Bob, a former revolutionary who is forced back into his combative past when a corrupt military officer begins to pursue him. This film encompasses many of the same themes as *Walden*, such as race, American dreams, civil disobedience, and ‘which side’, if any, it is on, which show us just how relevant *Walden* still is today. But turning to the topic of this article, I will now consider it in relation to gender performance.

Focusing on two of the protagonists of the film, Bob Ferguson and Perfidia Beverly Hills do in many ways challenge and renegotiate gendered expectations of our society. Perfidia Beverly Hills in *One Battle After Another* aggressively challenges and renegotiates gendered expectations by embodying forms of power and agency that are conventionally coded masculine. As a warrior who shoots, kicks, and commands others, Perfidia adopts what Kiesling (2007) calls the ‘discourse of dominance’, in which masculinity is indexed through authority, control, and dominance over others. Her language is overtly aggressive, profane, and saturated with domination, which aligns her with the linguistic practices Kiesling identifies as constituting hegemonic masculine power. This is seen in the beginning of the film, where she is taking charge, commanding, and using short declarative sentences (*One Battle After Another* 2:00-7:17). Another example is viewed in a scene when she is heavily pregnant, aggressively firing a machine gun, barely noticing her pregnant state. Here she says: “The guns are the fucking fun” (*One Battle After Another* 16:05-16:35). Yet Perfidia’s performance does not simply reproduce masculinity; it destabilizes normative gender roles by placing these masculine-coded behaviors within a female and explicitly maternal body. After her baby is born, she does not assume the normative role of a mother, and in a scene, she says: “I want to feel seen and loved and appreciated. I fucking carried her nine months. Now he gets to fucking walk around and swoon all fucking day. It’s like she’s his only girl. Like, I just no longer exist. I’m just a fucking piece of meat. And sometimes I feel crazy, and I’m like, am I weird for being jealous

of my baby?” (*One Battle After Another* 18:00-18:31), showing her jealousy of her own daughter. Her refusal to conform to sentimentalized ideals of motherhood further disrupts expectations that maternal identity should overshadow personal desire. Her jealousy of her child, self-centered assertions of agency: “I put myself first, and that is what you are scared of” (*One Battle After Another* 19:05-19:10), and rejection of caregiving norms fracture the cultural script of self-sacrificing femininity. Ultimately, Perfidia’s violent autonomy and her embrace of men’s linguistic and behavioral patterns expose the instability of gendered categories, revealing how dominance itself can be appropriated and repurposed to critique the gendered limits placed on women.

Bob Ferguson also destabilizes normative gender roles, though in a way that contrasts sharply with Perfidia’s hyper-masculine performance. While he initially engages in male-coded revolutionary acts such as bomb-making, partaking in futurism like having a family, and occasional participation in violence, Bob ultimately occupies a position more closely associated with feminized domesticity and emotional expressiveness. After the birth of his child, he becomes the primary caregiver, nursing, nurturing (*One Battle After Another* 18:00-20:00), and attending parent-teacher meetings (*One Battle After Another* 34:30-36:35) while Perfidia continues the revolution outside the home. His assumption of the ‘mother’ role, paired with his overt emotional vulnerability, like crying, panicking, and expressing fear and paranoia, directly challenges the cultural expectation that men should remain stoic, controlled, and emotionally more distant than women. Yet Bob’s emotional depth and domestic caretaking do not signal passivity. His fierce protectiveness of his daughter and willingness to risk himself to rescue her reframes care as a form of strength rather than a deviation from masculinity. This is seen when he gets the news that Steve Lockjaw is coming after them and that his daughter has been taken. Here he pulls himself out of his state of panic and paranoia and moves into action, showing that his fear and care for his daughter is a motivator and strength that gets him out of his state of despair (*One Battle After Another* 1:00:40-1:04:40). Even as his long hair, disheveled appearance, substance abuse, and hermit-like withdrawal evoke the trope of the broken man, Bob’s narrative renegotiates gendered expectations by showing that vulnerability, caregiving, and fear can coexist with traditionally masculine traits such as bravery, loyalty, and violent resistance. In this way, Bob’s character complicates binary understandings of masculinity and femininity, revealing how men, too, can inhabit roles and emotional states that lie outside hegemonic masculine norms.

Taken together, the gender performances in *One Battle After Another* illuminate parallels with those in *Walden*, revealing how both works challenge, reproduce, and renegotiate cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity. In *Walden*, Thoreau complicates normative gender roles by blending masculine-coded autonomy and intellectual authority with feminized domestic labor,

emotional attentiveness, and frugal housekeeping. His sweeping, baking, hosting, and sentimental care for animals disrupt nineteenth-century ideals that aligned femininity with domesticity and masculinity with public authority. Similarly, *One Battle After Another* destabilizes contemporary gender norms through the contrasting performances of Perfidia and Bob. Perfidia adopts a hyper-masculine discourse of dominance through aggression, command, and violent action, and her maternal body and refusal of sentimental motherhood resist easy categorization, just as Thoreau's domestic femininity unsettles assumptions about male transcendentalists. Bob, in turn, mirrors Thoreau's feminized practices even more directly. He becomes the primary caregiver, expresses emotional vulnerability, and performs labor culturally coded as feminine, while still exhibiting moments of masculine bravery and protection. In both texts, gender is shown not as a fixed essence but as a set of behaviors that can be borrowed, inverted, or reassembled. By placing Thoreau's nineteenth-century genderqueer domesticity alongside the film's contemporary reconfigurations of maternal violence and paternal care, we see how each work exposes the instability of gender norms and demonstrates the ongoing negotiation between what men and women are expected to be and what they can become.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have investigated *Walden* with the use of gender theory and found that Thoreau's self-presentation both aligns with and departs from conventional gender roles. Thoreau performs gender expected masculine-coded behavior, such as building his own cabin, cutting his own wood, measuring, and cataloguing. But Thoreau also deviates from gender expectations of his time by doing housework, baking, and hosting and caring for guests, acting the role of a spinster, and with that performing feminine-coded behavior. Thus, Thoreau shows us by his genderqueer behavior that gender is not a fixed essence but a set of behaviors that can be borrowed and performed by anyone. Thoreau further queers his behavior by including animals as a part of his family. By performing this genderqueer behavior, Thoreau shows us the social and cultural constructedness of these expectations and opens for a discussion and renegotiation of gender role expectations. Much the same is seen in *One Battle After Another*, where the protagonists challenge our social and cultural expectations, which exposes the instability of gender norms and demonstrates the ongoing negotiation between what men and women are expected to be and how they are expected to behave.

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