I Am A Woman, the landmark 1959 pulp fiction novel by Ann Bannon, focuses upon Laura Landon’s move to New York and her subsequent discovery of her own same-sex attraction and eventual acceptance of a lesbian identity. Bannon introduces these themes to the reader through an exploration of Greenwich Village’s gay and lesbian subculture (especially centered around a bar called The Cellar) and discussion of forms of lesbian identity (specifically that shown by “butch” lesbian Beebo Brinker). Analysis of the works of Lillian Faderman and Kate Adams in relation to Bannon’s original text shows that the development, acceptance, and longevity of identity relies heavily upon the existence, and participation within, the subculture, and that the pulp fiction format is itself crucial to the depiction of both.

I Am a Woman’s status as pulp fiction – or simply a “paperback novel” – frames it as part of an underground movement of sorts. In her “Making the World Safe for the Missionary Position: Images of the Lesbian in Post-World War II America,” Kate Adams discusses the controversial 1950 novel, Women’s Barracks by Tereska Torrès, which Adams describes as a “paperback novel […] which portrayed lesbianism in conventionally pathological as well as sensational terms” (257-59). The novel was the victim of much scrutiny and controversy, being described by the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Current Pornographic Materials as “degenerate,” “immoral,” and “perverted.” This committee, in 1952, specifically targeted “paperbacks,” decrying their “cover art [for] featuring ‘luring and daring illustrations of voluptuous young women’” (Adams 257-59). Though it was published in 1959, this description could easily be applied to Bannon’s novel – Indeed, Adams notes that I Am a Woman was published by the same publishing house as Women’s Barracks (259).

However, the House Committee’s scrutiny of Women’s Barracks did not necessarily have the desired impact on lesbian literature. Adams states that the novel “acted as a wedge, a way into print for other texts which would treat lesbianism more positively and radically than Women’s Barracks itself did” (259). I Am a Woman can easily be seen as an example of such a title. Adams discusses the ability of pulp novels to circumvent the “‘quality control’ mechanisms” of traditional publication and she later writes that the pulp format “allowed controversial or marginal texts to come into print” (259). Able to avoid censorship applied to “high” literature of the time, the format was already “underground.” Compounding this, due to their inexpensive quality, “paperbacks” were readily and especially available to the urban working class, such as the New York lesbians depicted in Bannon’s novel. In accordance with Adams’s research, the format also gave Bannon some leeway to discuss topics not well-understood or -received by the general public and to portray lesbianism in a more positive manner.

A prominent feature in I Am a Woman is the gay bar. In her book Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, Lillian Faderman discusses the rise of the gay bar as a response unique
to the queer community, and lesbians in particular: "There were no lesbian ghettos where they could be assured of meeting others like themselves and being accepted precisely for that attribute that the outside world shunned" (161). The solution then presented itself in the form of bars – "dark, secret, a nighttime place" – where lesbians could meet like others and generally feel safe, becoming one of the few sanctuaries available to lesbians in 1950’s America (Faderman 161). This is shown in I Am a Woman by Laura’s habitual, if often unexplained, urge to go to The Cellar, one of the Village’s gay bars, when she is confronted with stressful or confusing situations:

Resolutely she began to walk, climbing the stairs and then starting down Seventh Avenue. She walked as if she had a goal, precisely because she had none and it frightened her. […] Within five minutes, she was standing in front of The Cellar, rather surprised at herself for finding it so quickly. There was a strange tingling up and down her back and her eyes began to shine with a feverish luster. She walked down the steps and pulled the door open. (Bannon 79-80)

This acutely shows Laura’s urges to go to the bar; she is simply wandering the streets, and finds herself at The Cellar’s door, which is portrayed as almost instinctual. Despite the accidental nature of her visit there, Bannon provides the reader with a visceral description of Laura’s intense emotional reaction upon her arrival.

As the novel progresses, Laura’s near-dependency on the physical space of The Cellar deepens, and develops into something more social in nature. Once, while walking home from work, Laura reluctantly decides to head to The Cellar instead. She creates an excuse for herself involving paying Beebo for a drink, but even she seems to acknowledge that this is superficial reasoning. Bannon writes, “There was always a moment of fear and reluctance. But the need to be with her own kind quickly overpowered it” (126). This is in keeping with Faderman’s assessment that “[gay bars] represented the one public place where those who had accepted a lesbian sociosexual identity did not have to hide who they were” (162).

As an extension of the acceptance of lesbian identity in the gay bars, there is also an acceptance of various forms of expression of that identity, specifically through the presentation of “butch” or “femme.” Being of the more gender non-conforming of the two roles, “butch” women found the most comfort in this environment; according to Faderman, “the bars were a particular relief for many butch working-class women because it was only there that they could dress ‘right,’ in pants, in which they felt the most comfortable” (162). The “butch” identity is most starkly shown in the character of Beebo, whose description is an obvious, nearly clichéd example by contemporary standards (“black pants,” “short and dark” hair [Bannon 36]).

In the novel, Beebo’s chosen occupation is that of an elevator operator, simply because it allowed her to wear pants, which Laura cannot understand. She asks Beebo, “Are pants really that important?” (Bannon 180). However, it seems that pants really are that important; Beebo is so committed to her identity that she has made it a priority to hold a low-paying occupation which allows her to express it. This is consistent with Faderman’s assertion that “there were few jobs in the 1950’s for which women might wear pants” (162). However, this does show that there was a desire to apply these
identities in everyday life; the identity which formed within the subculture was not beginning to spill over into everyday life.

In contrast with Beebo, Laura’s identity is much less established. Aside from one former lover, there was no one in her life she knew to be homosexual before she moved to New York and began frequenting The Cellar. She had never even heard the word “gay” used in a queer context before meeting Jack (Bannon 33). In addition, she is initially ignorant of the “butch” and “femme” identities before going to The Cellar. Neither of these prescribed identities seem to apply to her; she certainly isn’t “butch,” but she does not go out of her way to emphasize her femininity, either. This shows that these identities are not inherent to lesbians, but are a direct product of the subculture represented by The Cellar, and they would not exist without it.

Ann Bannon’s portrayal of lesbians in *I Am a Woman* is generally much more positive than in much of the literature that preceded it, and because of this, the novel is an important one – and not only within the pulp format. This format is crucial, however, as the novel likely never would have appeared in print had Bannon attempted to go through a traditional publisher. The novel exposes a rich subculture and presents an insightful discussion about lesbian identity in 1950’s New York, and shows the inherent connectedness between the two. Upon examining descriptions of The Cellar, Laura Landon, and Beebo Brinker, the reader can see the extent of this connectedness, and the role the subculture plays in forging this identity.

Works Cited

