

Introduction to Cultural Text Analysis and Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married"

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Introduction to *Cultural Text Analysis and Liksiom's Short Story "We Got Married"*

Urpo KOVALA

The papers in this thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* are studies in textual analysis as informed by developments in (comparative) cultural studies. The problem of the contextuality of meaning is both the starting point and common thread in the papers of the issue. Contextualist views of meaning cannot by any means be equated with cultural studies, as there were contextualist approaches long before the rise of British cultural studies from the 1950s on. And comparatism, which is the other main focus of *CLCWeb*, is by definition a contextualist endeavour. But cultural studies, nevertheless, was one of the main factors contributing to the spread of explicitly contextualist thinking within the humanities and the social sciences. Cultural studies itself has moved a long way from text-centred analysis to tracing the multiple contextual determinants of text. But at the same time also the function and significance of text and textual analysis have become more difficult to conceive of. Why study texts, what is the relationship of text with reception and with contexts more generally, and what is textual analysis informed by cultural studies in practice?

The above questions are addressed in the papers of the issue by looking at one text and trying out various contextualisations on it. The text used is an untitled short story by Rosa Liksiom, "We Got Married" (Liksiom <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>>). The shared material consists of the story and data on its reception in six European countries. The articles share the intention of clarifying, in the light of the empirical materials, the role and possibilities of textual analysis in what could by now, after the model of "post-feminism," be called a "post-cultural studies" situation. Although the backgrounds of the writers are in a number of different disciplines -- sociology, media studies, literary studies, and English studies -- and not all of them would identify themselves as cultural studies scholars in the strictest sense of the term, all the writers are concerned here and in their other work with understanding the way texts live in society. At the same time, they comment on ongoing discussions concerning the role of text and text analysis within cultural studies. Our starting point is that perceptive text analysis and contextual sensitivity are not incompatible if text and context are so conceptualised as to allow for -- and in effect require -- a multi-level, heterological text analysis.

Although this is not widely known, textual analysis, in fact even close reading, was a central part of the research of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, as it had been for the pioneers of cultural studies, notably Raymond Williams. But then, close reading for them meant a context-sensitive activity. For instance, the first collective research project of the Centre, the results of which do not survive, focused on a story from a women's magazine, "Cure for Marriage" by Nancy Burrage Owen (see Lawrence Grossberg, *Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997. 24-25). The approach testifies to a belief in contextual text analysis: with what Stuart Hall calls the Centre's "pre-feminist" interest in gender issues, the participants "spent ages" on the story (see Kuan-Hsing Chen, "The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual: An Interview with Stuart Hall" in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. London: Routledge, 1996. 484-503, 499). Just as in the project from which the articles of this thematic issue come from, although we were not initially aware of such a pioneer project, a text was submitted to a multi-perspective contextualising analysis.

The contributions to the journal's issue on cultural text analysis are loosely connected with an international research project which looked at the reception of one short story in six European countries. The countries involved were Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, and Great Britain. The project was a qualitative comparative case study, in which about 60 readers from each country, half high school students, half adults in middle-class professions, read the same story. It was presented to the readers without any information of its author or contexts. The readers then wrote three essays on the story and were interviewed, the interview dealing both with the reception of the text in more detail and with backgrounds, everyday life and reader's histories of the respondents. The comparison was carried out by means of a checklist of questions (for more details on the project, its goals and methodology, see Urpo Kovala and Erkki Vainikkala, eds. *Reading Cultural Difference: The Reception of a Short Story in Six European Countries*. Jyväskylä: U of Jyväskylä, 2000). In the papers of this thematic issue the authors leave the original research design, which centred on the reception of the story, in the background; instead, the focus here is more on the text and, thereby, particularly on the question of the role of text and textual analysis in a comparative cultural approach to literature.

Rosa Liksiom's Short Story "We Got Married"

The short story analysed in the papers is an untitled text beginning with the words "We got married on the fourteenth of November" by Finnish writer Rosa Liksiom (see Rosa Liksiom, "We Got

Married" [untitled short story]. *One Night Stands*. By Rosa Liksom. Trans. Anselm Hollo. London & New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993. 80-81. <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>>; for a brief biography and a list of works of Liksom, see *Rosa Liksom*

<<http://www.rovaniemi.fi/lapinkirjailijat/rosa/erosa.htm#tuotanto>>). It comes from the collection *Tyhjän tien paratiisit* (*Paradises of the Empty Road*, 1989) and appeared in English in the selection *One Night Stands* in 1993. Taking place in an urban milieu, the story is a short and very intense account of a two-week marriage that was "exactly two weeks too long." The story is told in the first person. The female protagonist picks up a man in a restaurant and marries him. When the man fails to meet her expectations, she stabs him and gets away with it. The story ends with the narrator's words, "Hell, if a guy wants to live with you he's got to take on some responsibilities" (Liksom <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>>). The story is remarkably terse and is told in a laconic tone, using urban slang.

As Erkki Vainikkala points out in his article, the story contains and brings up themes closely connected with developments associated with postmodernity and erosion of values (Vainikkala <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/3/>>). It brings to the foreground the tension between work and laziness, citizens and authorities; it portrays a man-woman relationship of frustrated expectations, and it raises the question of family violence. The language and the setting are urban, and there are signs of alienation and slackening of traditional social connections. On the other hand, the story contains elements where traditional values connected with heterosexuality, wage labour, and even traditional gender roles are emphasised. However, this is done in ways which leave the text open to be read in terms of realism, irony, or satire. No guidance is given to the reader, which leaves the moral perspective open; but for many readers it may, and did, also make the author's and the narrator's positions fall together. The narrative situation gives a certain immediacy to the text, which is reinforced by the fact that there is virtually no reflexive distance between the narrating and the experiencing or acting self. This sense of immediate reality, however, is hollowed out by other means. Thus the story, outlining a terrain between the familiar and the strange, gives plenty of room for very different kinds of reading.

Text is nowadays often described, in theoretical discourse, as a network rather than an entity. The story and the data on its reception in different European contexts provided us with a good opportunity to juxtapose different ways of analysing and conceptualising that network. The diversity of the approaches shows that culturally oriented analysis, too, is plural: it depends on context and perspective. With different writers, the focus is on different parts of the text-reception-contexts continuum. But at the same time the articles manifest a shared effort to understand the life of the network that is fictional text.

A Postmodern Cure for Marriage? A Story in Crosslight

In the papers, the authors both address the question of cultural text analysis, more or less directly, and try out different kinds of contextualisations on the story, moving between the story, its reception, and the various contexts. In the opening article, Urpo Kovala discusses the role and nature of textual analysis in cultural studies. Going through the various positions as regards text and textual analysis in the field, the writer discusses the reasons for including textual analysis in the toolbox of a cultural studies scholar. When included, it must be conceptualised in a way that departs from the established text-context dichotomy. Above all, such an approach needs to picture both text and context as dynamic, complex, heterological, and perspective-dependent phenomena. As said, the story used in the articles is not very reader-friendly, precluding easy naturalisation but paradoxically, in so doing, also inviting it. In the first of the empirical articles, Erkki Vainikkala analyses the story in terms of a structure of reversals which both offers standpoints and withdraws them. He links his rhetorical-narratological analysis with an account of one Estonian "layman" reader's account of the story. The reading is examined as a political allegory of the situation in the country. The writer shows how elements of the story are regrouped in the response to serve this strategy. Thus the story is preserved in the article as an important textual signifier for the act of reading. As with most of the articles, reading is here conceived of as a textual encounter, but as understood in both experiential and structural terms; this allegorical force field draws on contexts taken both as concrete reading situations and as cultural discourses.

In his article, "Liksom's Short Stories and the Ironies of Contemporary Existence" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/4/>>, Chris Pawling sets out with a discussion of a newspaper story of a woman who decided "it would be a good idea" to look up a strange man and stab him. He then moves on to discuss the Liksom story as well as a couple of other stories by the same authoress which present a similar situation and where the shock effect is much the same. According to Pawling, the strikingly "insurgent" elements in Liksom's fiction are in conflict with a mode of narration which "leads ultimately to political indifference" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/4/>>).

The stories basically rely on a modernist aesthetics and it is this that also makes it difficult for many readers to appropriate the story. Pawling goes on to discuss the existence of different aesthetics, drawing on Bourdieu, and suggests with

reference to the reception of the story that there is a continuing distance between avant-garde and "popular" expectations of literature.

Kimmo Jokinen, in his paper "Liksiom's Short Story 'We Got Married' and (Finnish) Identity Construction" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/5/>> turn, relates the story and its reception to a macro context, the changes brought along by late modern developments in contemporary Western society. He points out that in late modernity, narratives take on enhanced importance through their connection to identity construction. In negotiations with texts, readers often replicate old approaches to literature. With reference to Finnish readers of the Liksiom story, Jokinen shows how the "ideal scenery" connected with national identity tends to come up even in the case of provoking, "difficult," texts such as the Liksiom one. However, he also identifies in his materials an emerging approach, which is more individualistic and playful, and foregrounds the theme of sexuality. Like Pawling, who underlines the existence of different aesthetics, Jokinen, too, points out continuities and the gradual nature of the changes in aesthetics and literary taste.

In her article, "Reading Liksiom's Short Story 'We Got Married' in Post-communist Bulgaria" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/6/>>, Kornelia Slavova analyses one finding that she made concerning the Bulgarian reception of the Liksiom story: the salience of cultural stereotypes in the reception. She goes on to discuss this phenomenon in relation to the role of stereotypes in everyday life on the one hand, and to the post-Communist situation in Bulgaria on the other. Her point is that stereotypical patterns concerning gender and nationality function as palimpsest structures which continue earlier bipolar representations. She suggests that texts and textual analysis still play a crucial role in cultural studies just because they provide an excellent inroad to fantasies and myths of the culture in question.

The question of difference, so dear to cultural studies, naturally presents itself in this connection, too. While Pawling's article foregrounds synchronic differences in tastes and cultural values, Malle Järve's article "Reading Liksiom's Short Story 'We Got Married' in Post-communist Estonia and in Finland" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/7/>> deals with changes in them along time. She analyses the changes that have taken place -- extremely rapidly -- in the literary expectations of Estonians after the Independence in 1991. Since then, Estonians have gained access to kinds of literature, including avant-garde, which they had mostly been unacquainted with during the Soviet era. Järve pinpoints signs of this change in her two samples of the reception of the Liksiom story, gathered in 1993 and 1998. She notes that the tendency towards "placing" -- rather rigid stereotyping along the lines of class and ethnicity especially, was actually on the increase. On the other hand, readers were clearly becoming more used to the kind of avant-garde fiction that Liksiom's story represents. The story was felt to be much less disconcerting in 1998 than in 1993, and was increasingly interpreted within an audio-visual frame of reference.

This very question of the change of cultural codes and practices turns out to recur in all of the papers. And the focus, although Järve stresses the rapid changes in Estonian reading culture in the 1990s, is rather on continuity. Pawling points out the perseverance of different, socially determined, aesthetics, Jokinen looks at the slow change of horizons of expectation, notably those connected to identity formation, and Slavova finds that old codes of interpretation are going strong in spite of -- and actually because of -- the "postmodern" turmoil of codes in post-communist Bulgaria. Contextuality does not automatically disperse all meaning as wind does to ashes, because contexts can be relatively stable and shared, even though the idea of the contextual plurality of meaning seems to encourage the idea of an endless dissemination of meaning.

If cultural text analysis is plural, the text also appears in different light in the different contextualisations. For Järve, the Liksiom story is a modernist text par excellence, demanding specific interpretive frames, the kind of which were not encouraged during the Soviet period in Estonia. Slavova sees the text more clearly as postmodernist, purposely playing with the reader's expectations and evading closure. Rather than high modernism, she links it, with reservations, with the radical art of the end of the twentieth century. Jokinen, too, points out the conscious flouting of expectations, focussing in his discussion on national cultural expectations. Vainikkala and Pawling, in turn, detect certain contradictions or at least tensions about the story. Pawling finds that Liksiom's fiction walks a tightrope between an ironic modernism and a "blank" postmodernism, between a committed feminism and more distanced postfeminism. But he adds that in the last resort, and in context, the story harks back to elitism and an "aesthetics of distinction." In Vainikkala's words, the story "functions against itself," "hollowing out" or precluding any possible deeper meanings or interpretations (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/3/>>). Vainikkala's analysis emphasises the importance of textual thresholds while Pawling relates the ambivalences of the text with the aesthetics through which they are interpreted.

In particular Pawling and Vainikkala show us in their papers how the relationship of textual features and cultural contexts is a complex and mediated one and cannot be "read" straight from either the text or metatexts, e.g., reception documents. And all the writers see the text as an important source of information concerning culture at large -- it provides us with an indirect access

to culturally important questions that would be more difficult to approach directly. Text is also seen as an important point of reference anchoring our interpretations of the reception materials. Context does have power, but text has its say as well; although it is not independent of contexts and "outside" of them, text does have an existence in academic and other practices and provides us with an important inroad to cultural meanings.

Introducing the topic of the thematic issue at hand, in my own paper, "Cultural Studies and Cultural Text Analysis" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/2/>>, I discuss the role of textual analysis in cultural studies. Starting with a sketch of different conceptions of textual analysis within cultural studies and by pointing to differences in the concepts of text and context themselves, I explore the reasons for including textual analysis as a category and method in cultural studies and in humanities and social sciences scholarship generally. Further, I present briefly a model for the cultural analysis of text where my main point is that the argument about the incompatibility of cultural studies and textual analysis is untenable today and propose that, instead, what is needed now is a heterological, multi-level, and perspectival notion of both text and context. A "Selected Bibliography of Work in Cultural Text Analysis"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/10/>>, compiled by Xianfeng Mou and Urpo Kovala, rounds up this thematic issue on reading Liksom's short story "We Got Married" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>>.

In closing, I would like to thank *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, its editor Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and its advisory board, for the support and interest we received for the publication *Cultural Text Analysis and Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married"* in the journal. Readers of the papers interested in further discussion are encouraged to contact the authors of papers: e-mail addresses are in the author's profile with each paper.