

Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married" and (Finnish) Identity Construction

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Thematic Issue Cultural Text Analysis and Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married"

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Abstract: In his paper, "Liksom's Short Story 'We Got Married' and (Finnish) Identity Construction," Kimmo Jokinen proposes the validity of common belief today that a shift into a late-modern era is taking place. It has often been claimed in contemporary sociological debates that our "post-industrial" life has become more thoroughly imbricated with culture and signs and sociologists, in their analyses of contemporary life, are interested especially in stories people tell, hear, and read. Based on readers' survey data in Finland, Jokinen analyses the ways in which Rosa Liksom's short story "We Got Married" is being employed in identity construction. For Jokinen, Liksom's text provides us with two different types of negotiation between reader and text: one that focuses on the construction of national identity and the other where the text is individualistic and playful, with focus on the theme of sexuality.

Kimmo JOKINEN

Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married" and (Finnish) Identity Construction

Introduction

Life itself does not constitute a narrative. True, the interval between a person's life and death can be seen as a continuum with a beginning and an end. Thus it can be seen to involve narrative development from the past towards the future. Based on just that criterion, however, we can talk of narrativity in a very limited and stretched sense only. On the other hand there is much in life that is impossible to conceive of without the notion of narrative. Such things include individual and collective identities. As these do not emerge 'naturally,' their existence entails man-made stories as well as continuous retelling and modification. In turn, fiction has traditionally been among the most important fields within culture that provide materials for the construction of identities. In this article I am analysing the ways in which Rosa Liksom's short story, "We Got Married"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>> gets used in such identity work. The story depicts the value conflicts and tensions in contemporary Western reality. As the story does not provide any easy handles for the reader, he or she has to take pains to naturalise such a text and make it readable. He or she has to negotiate its meanings in order to find a meaningful strategy of entrance into the world of the text. I am drawing on two different materials describing the reception of the Liksom story. One was gathered in Jyväskylä, Finland, in 1993, by asking 67 respondents, one half high school students, the other half adults in "new-middle-class" professions. The second material I gathered in connection with my methodology lecture courses at the University of Jyväskylä in 2000 and 2001. The respondents were about 150 students in the social sciences. The two materials were gathered in slightly different ways, but in both cases, the readers were asked, among other things, what they thought the story is about. Here I am focussing on this very question, which invites a thematic interpretation. By means of these answers, I identify and analyse two different types of negotiation between reader and text. Both types can be dubbed as uses of text to prop and construct one's identity, but these types differ greatly. The one focuses on the construction of collective national identity. The other one, in turn, is more individualistic and playful. The main theme taken up is sexuality, notably the tensions between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Narratives and Communal Identity

It is a common belief today that a shift into a kind of post-industrial or late modern era has taken or is taking place. This does not necessarily mean that we wouldn't still be having experiences of such phenomena typical of the traditional industrial system as wage labour, relatively stable professional identities, national cultures, welfare state, nuclear family, and traditional gender roles. But especially in those disciplines that aim at a diagnostic account of our times, our society, and ourselves, it is commonly thought that understanding of all this cannot be based on analyses of industrial production, class structure, or other such 'industrial' factors. An oft-heard claim in these debates is that life in the Western countries has become more thoroughly imbricated with culture and signs. In this line of thinking, an accelerated consumption of signs and symbols as well as related identity projects, in turn organised by the market, the media, and consumption in general, are at the core of the contemporary experience. Social structures that develop into new directions and are increasingly susceptible to change, as well as accelerating individualisation, are an important part of this restructuring of the industrial order.

At the beginning of the new millennium, such diagnostic analyses of contemporary life are especially intrigued by the stories which people tell and which they are told. Diaries, autobiographies, TV series, or pop songs narrating everyday life, as well as popular fiction, are all good instances of such narratives. Through these stories people read their own lives and the communities which they feel they belong or would like to belong to. National identity, although increasingly questioned today, is nevertheless still a crucial collective structure in the Western countries. It invites and requires time-and-place-specific narratives. In order for people to see their society as an 'us' society, they need to have some kind of a notion of a shared history or a mythical past linking to the present and pointing towards the future. These narratives do not provide a mirror-like reflection of

reality. Instead, they involve choice, reorganisation, and simplification. The stories by means of which we keep up national identities are thus not out there to be found and picked up. They combine events and reorganise them into a meaningful order for a particular audience, and provide them with images of a shared 'national' world and of the people living therein. (see Hinchman and Hinchman 1997b, xv-xx).

For the existence of communities such as the nation, the narratives produced by historiography, fiction, and film are of enhanced importance. They are an excellent means of keeping up a notion of us as a community and of the relationships of that community with others. They serve to keep up group integrity and prevent communal traditions from being forgotten. In other words, narratives constitute community, they *are* the community. National culture can in fact be seen as a narrative which members of a culture tell themselves and each other in order to make social life understandable and meaningful for themselves. Such narratives, of course, do not belong to all people to an equal extent. That is why there is an ongoing struggle over their meanings. The point in that struggle is how reality should be interpreted and who is allowed to consider his or her interpretation as the best one (see Hinchman and Hinchman 1997a, 235).

Liksom's "We Got Married" against the Background of National Imagery

In Finland, the status of original Finnish literature has traditionally been strong. According to Katarina Eskola (1989, 181-84, 190-93), Finnish culture still constitutes, in spite of television and personal computers, an environment favourable to book reading. Finnish readers still prefer realistic prose fiction describing their own life and producing and keeping up the significant structures organising their lives. This is why translated fiction, even though it does gain a lot of readers, has not, at least yet, been able to invade the Finnish book market. When an ordinary Finnish reader is asked his opinion of what makes a good book, an important feature turns out to be that the book should convey a sense of belonging together: popular stories support a particular communality. At its largest the community in question may be a nation: readers tend to see Finnishness, as dealt with in the books, as an important and self-evident part of life. But the community can also be a more specific and local one, for instance Ostrobothnia or Karelia. Quite often the community is situated in the countryside or a small town. It is rarely to be found in a modern urban location. What is of especial importance is that the writer describe the ordinary everyday life of the community. Positive accounts of work, mutual help and warm, reliable relationships are seen as features of a good book. And if the author also manages to convey the people's spoken language, for instance well-spoken colloquial sayings in all their richness, the chances of making the reader happy are good (see Jokinen 1993, 19-21). In addition to all this, the descriptions of everyday life must be faithful. The readers dislike mistakes and exaggeration. In general, the fact that the reader can trust the truthfulness of the descriptions tends to guarantee the work in question a wide readership. Only humourists are excepted. Truthfulness may be based for instance on a sense of familiarity. That is, the book tells of the world of the reader or his/her close ones. Often readers also mention the author's own experiences or expertise as criteria for the truthfulness of his/her books. Believability and communality intertwine with emotionality. Thus, the reading experience based on truthfulness entails a positive affective bond between the reader and the characters, the milieu, and the events (see Jokinen 1997, 33-34).

When Liksom's short story -- very different from the type of favourite reading matter mentioned above -- was given to readers in Jyväskylä in 1993, the reactions were as could be expected. The respondents disliked the story on the grounds that the language was ugly and coarse. Above all they criticised the slang and the swearwords. The characters struck them as offputting, as they were lazy and incapable of understanding or helping each other. The milieu -- an urban milieu with restaurants on the centrestage -- was described as a superficial and offputting world in which people only seek to satisfy their own needs, act on the spur of the moment, are rootless and unable to make commitments. Readers also criticised the unrealistic features of the story. They found it difficult to identify with the characters, and considered the events unlikely. Most often they wondered the ease of the killing and the fact that the main character got away with it (see Koskimaa and Jokinen 157-59).

But what does the negative reception of Liksom's short story actually tell us? One interpretation would be that there is a wide gap between the Finnish readers' literary horizon of expectations and Liksom's text. If we assume that readers expect fiction to deal with ordinary Finnish everyday life in a warm, empathic manner, to use language that sounds honest and genuine, and promote communality that involves commitment and mutual help, they do not easily find a fluent strategy of entrance into Liksom's story. Naturalisation is also hindered by the fact that the events in the story fail to convince the reader. And more problems still are caused by the fact that the Finnish reading culture does not recognise the kind of urban life depicted in the story as the kind of 'ideal scenery' which would make a text attractive and worthwhile (see Jokinen 1997, 168). In other words, the ideals to be seen behind the reception of Liksom's text are almost contrary to those by means of which Finnish readers usually characterise their favourite reading matter. Good equals community, positive approach, traditions, interaction, care, hard work, warmth and continuity. In the Liksom readings, in contrast, the emphasis is on the other part of the binary opposition. Her story focuses on evil, momentariness in human relations, indifference, lack of tradition, coldness and cynicism. In addition, it tells about this world in its own language, which readers think of as brutal and artificial. Thus, the reception of Liksom's story shows how readers have difficulties in dealing with a text which breaches with conventions typical of Finnish literary culture. A cultural product, in this case a piece of fiction, is necessarily related to the interpretive conventions of the receiving culture. In Finland the 'national' horizon of expectations is still so strong that readers tend to turn down a text which on the one hand disagrees with the expected imagery and on the other hand also exploits it in its specific, parodic manner.

Towards Individual Strategies of Negotiation

Readers did, especially in the more recent materials I am drawing on, approach the text from other angles as well. A topic which aroused vivid debate links to the gender pact. Liksom's text invited readers to ponder on gender relations quite extensively. Some readers expressed nostalgia for the clarity of the old gender relations, others thought gender equality had gone too far. Surprisingly many readers seemed to value the model of the patriarchal nuclear family dressed with a limited dose of equality. The new type of woman with a focus on career was not denounced altogether, nor were the softer sides of man outright rejected. Mainly, however, man's world was seen to involve taking care of things, strength, and decision-making, while the woman was supposed to focus on the home, tenderness, and feelings. The findings seem to indicate that the respondents' views of family models and gender roles are still to a considerable extent conservative (see Eskola 1996, 67-72). On the other hand, these things were spoken of by other readers in more modern overtones. Not all readers saw the situation as a conflict between new and old in which it would be safest to stick to familiar, established solutions. Part of the readers pondered from different angles the pros and cons of different solutions. The relationship between a couple and the problems therein were discussed, as were gender roles and the tensions involved. In these discussions, gender relations turned out in the last resort to be very ambivalent, and no unanimous view of what should be done emerged (see Jokinen 1997, 170-75; Koskimaa, 180-82). However, When we look at the later materials, the interpretations of the story made by social science students in 2000 and 2001, the situation becomes more complex. The same basic themes do appear in this interpretation of what the story is about as in the 1993 responses. There is one interesting difference, however. Over ten per cent of the students took up the possibility that the main couple in the story is a homosexual couple. Most readers in the project took it for granted that the main character, who is also the narrator, is a woman, but on a closer look, it is actually nowhere said in the story that it would be about a man and a woman. So, the narrator can at will be taken to be a man!

The readers of the 1993 study never considered this possibility. Homosexual liaisons were not all that impossible any more in the early 1990s. The readers could thus quite well have thought that the story is about the relationship between two men and that the events could easily take place somewhere in the world, if not in Finland. And around the turn of the century there were hectic debates in Finland on the possibility and acceptability of homosexual marriages. At around the time the students were interpreting the Liksom text, the Finnish parliament accepted the law on the right of a couple of the same sex to have their liaison officially acknowledged. The gender

issue thus gained new content (see Jokinen and Saaristo). The responses can certainly also be interpreted so that highly educated readers can take an ironic and parodic distance to the text and play with literary conventions. But the difference in this respect between seventeen-year-old high school students, often university students-to-be, and university students in their early twenties is not great enough for us to assume that only the latter group can negotiate textual conventions. Rather, the example shows that the processing of a text involves the processing of issues that are central in the reader's life and in the contemporary culture at the same time. These issues can often be very personal and closely connected to one's identity and identity work.

Liksom and the Modern Turn

The two cases described above are very different. The first one can be said to foreground a national, community-building, tradition-centred, and realistic mode of reading. There the story is approached from a horizon of interpretation which is very typical in the Finnish reading culture. It can also be seen as part of the process of constructing and keeping up a collective identity. The other mode of reading, which lays the stress on sexuality and the gender pact, is much more individualistic. There the themes taken up by the readers have a strong personal aspect to them. Although negotiating gender and sexuality can be and is a serious business, in connection with the interpretations of the story the issue gains, at the hands of a number of readers, strongly playful overtones. These two ways of receiving Liksom's short story provide us with one possible inroad to analysing the contemporary cultural context and the relationships of texts or stories and identities in the late modern situation. It is often said that our age is one of strong individualisation. Traditional societal structures are eroding and being challenged by other formations, but there are also attempts to resuscitate those structures; part of them disappear, part undergo a transformation, others remain as they are and yet new ones emerge. In the last resort, however, it is up to the individual to decide which traditions he or she is going to stick to and which communities he or she wants to belong to. In this situation the responsibility for one's selfhood, too, is left to one's own responsibility. As for instance Anthony Giddens has pointed out, the individual must see to his or her own identity, keep the narrative of his or her identity going, and take responsibility for his or her community memberships (74-98).

Conclusion

On the basis of the above selected analyses, Liksom's short story and its reception can be described as a kind of a 'semiotic sponge' typical of the late modern period. It incorporates, in a condensed form, strong communal traditions. But at the same time it sucks in fresh meanings. Part of those meanings may provide the reader with handy tools for his or her identity work. Part, again, may be very short-lived, inviting the reader to assume a playful stance to the text. One might conjecture that in the modern turn, texts and readers enter all kinds of negotiations with each other. The need for stories is increasing, but there is typically no user's manual for them available in the later modern condition. The reception of Liksom's short story shows clearly that at least in the field of literature there are still strong traditions left in Finland. Even a new and strange text, when read, comes to be related to such traditions, and evaluated through them. But on the other hand, even such a text -- and perhaps such a text in particular -- may invite the reader to try out fresh approaches altogether. He or she may look for such materials in the text that can be used to prop one's relationship to oneself rather than to the community. Such ways of negotiating with the text may change quite rapidly, in line with the contemporary cultural situation, and be very individual.

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