

Reading Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married" in Post-communist Estonia

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**CLCWeb Volume 4 Issue 4 (December 2002) Article 7****Malle Järve,****"Reading Liksom's Short Story 'We Got Married' in Post-communist Estonia"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/7>>

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**Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 4.4 (2002)****Thematic Issue Cultural Text Analysis and Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married"****Edited by Urpo Kovala**<<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/>>>

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Reading Liksom's Short Story 'We Got Married' in Post-communist Estonia," Malle Järve discusses the reception of Rosa Liksom's text in post-communist Estonia. After gaining independence, Estonians became exposed to varieties of literature including avant-garde texts which did not fit easily with the expectations and rules of interpretation developed during Soviet rule. Based on data collected in 1993 and 1998, Järve focuses on the cultural repertoire (discourses, stereotypes, values, literary expectations, etc.) used by readers while constructing meaning to the text, perceived predominantly as foreign/Other. Järve's objective is an attempt to explain: 1) who/what the Other in the text is and how "otherness" / "self" is identified socially and articulated in terms of gender roles, social class, nationality, etc., and 2) how the cultural repertoire/codes used and the contextualization of the text changed during the 1990s in Estonia. In the interpretations of Estonian readers in both samples, the traditional notions of gender roles as well as class-related and national distinctions/stereotypes played an important role. For example, the notion of "low life" in the text was often attributed to local Russians. Järve's findings refer to a cultural model where achievement, education, moderation, good manners, social status, and other external and behavioral characteristics are highly valued. Of note is that the text caused less confusion for the readers in 1998 than in 1993 and that it was interpreted increasingly within an audio-visual frame of reference. She includes in her analysis Finnish respondents' data where a differentiation can be observed between Estonian and Finnish perceptions and responses to the short story.

**Malle JÄRVE**

## **Reading Liksom's Short Story "We Got Married" in Post-communist Estonia**

### **Introduction**

Reading and interpretation of a work of literature is a process that involves dialogue: it is communication between the world of the text and that of the reader, between own-ness and other-ness. The process is one that always includes acts of identification mediated by the reader's literary and life experiences as well as cultural codes and values working on the background. Identity as a mental construct means, simultaneously, both identification with and differentiation from drawing lines between "us" and "them," resting on common values, norms, traditional perceptions, etc. How we construct the Other and whom/what we identify as the "other" also reflects whom/what we identify with and what we wish to look like. The logic of identity is dualistic and is based on binary oppositions. The paradox of this process of differentiation or in/out opposition lies in the fact that the "own" is actually defined through the "strange" whose task it is to reflect the "own." Thus identity always contains non-identity, and it is always acquired at the price of the exclusion of the "other," either stifling or banning it (see Fuss 103).

In the present paper, I focus on the reception among Estonian youth of a short story, "We Got Married" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss4/8/>> by Rosa Liksom in 1993 and 1998 and I discuss such matters as the formation of cultural meanings and the factors that govern the latter in the interpretation of a literary text experienced predominantly as strange or Other. The main aim of the article is to explain: 1) Who/what was the Other in the story, and how the "Otherness" vs. the "own" was socially constructed, i.e., identified and articulated in terms of gender roles, class position, nationality, and so on; 2) What kind of cultural codes were applied in giving meaning to the text; and 3) Whether and how the construction of Otherness and the cultural repertoire used in young Estonians' readings changed during the 1990s. In my paper "cultural codes of interpretation" is employed as a broad concept, encompassing value orientations, stereotypes, discourses and presuppositions, as well as frames of reference related to the reception of text (references to one's own life, cultural products, social class/stratum, attitudes towards the language). Together, this forms a repertoire of interpretation through which the text is channelled to the readers and which defines what kind of meanings are read out of the text/into the text.

In the study, I attempt to integrate cultural-sociological and cultural studies approaches, following that tradition of empirical reception studies where broader cultural phenomena and developments are explained via reception of literature (see, e.g. Eskola; Leenhardt; Leenhardt and Józsa; Long). In my approach, I rely on the widely accepted position in reception studies that meanings of a literary work emerge during the course of mutual "negotiation" between the worlds of the text and the reader. From this encounter and mutual influence, the meaningfulness of the literary work is born. Interpretation of a text is also the creation of relationships where emotions, attitudes and values are as important as cognitive processes. A number of empirical reception studies of literature have demonstrated convincingly that belletristic texts are read via the reader's own life experiences and his/her socio-cultural context (see, e.g., Eskola; Long; Radway; Leenhardt; Kirstinä and Lörincz). At the same time, there is not much empirical evidence about how the reader's values, attitudes, and life experiences enter the process of reception.

The empirical data of the study are from two case studies, conducted in 1993 and 1998 among seventeen- and eighteen-year-old upper secondary school students in Tallinn: sample A contains data about 30 young people and sample B contains data about 34 subjects. Thus the study covers a total of 64 respondents, with a more or less equal gender distribution. The study conducted in 1993 also included middle-aged respondents in addition to young people and it constituted a part of the international project "Cultural Rules of Interpretation in Six European Countries" (see Kovala and Vainikkala; Järve, Kamdron and Papp). A follow-up study was carried out in 1998 on the basis of the same methodology among Estonian students. Both times, three kinds of data were gathered. First, essays where the readers were asked to write in response to the following three topics: 1) What is the story about, in your opinion?; 2) What kind of feelings did the characters of the story arouse in you?; and 3) Imagine that you do not know how the story ends: please write a new

ending to the story yourself. In the second instance, the respondents were also interviewed about the story and their own reading histories. And thirdly, a background questionnaire was used, focusing on respondents' cultural activities and media use.

### **Text as the "Other"**

Most of the Estonian young people in both case studies disliked the Liksom story. The main reasons for their negative attitude were the language and the unpleasant characters in the short story. What bothered them the most was the coarse language of the first-person narrator, in particular the number of abusive words which were to them simply unpleasant to read from a printed text. The text was deemed too "low," "rough," and "vulgar" to a great number of readers (e.g., "the bad language was intolerable, although the plot was interesting," FS 88B; FS refers to female students, MS male students, the letter A refers to respondents interviewed in 1993, and the letter a B to respondents interviewed in 1998). Another aspect that was emphasised was the incompatibility of slang and spoken language in general with a literary text. In this respect, Liksom's text did not meet the expectations of the readers about "good literature" and the expectations of the middle-aged readers were met even to a lesser extent: "If you undertake to write something after all, you should still confine yourself to decency ... not as if it were spoken and then transcribed from tape" (FS 58A); "I am not used to reading such ... anything so obscene. Strange to read when it's published as a book" (FS 87B); "There's definitely nothing artistic in there. I don't like reading such language; indeed, it should be decent then I could, say, take example from there myself, I could learn something" (FS 63B).

From a slightly different angle, some students emphasised that a great deal of such text could be heard in ordinary life anyway. Here, too, spoken language was opposed to the literary: "But you can hear such text on every corner. I think: I don't want to read books with such language very much precisely because it may be heard quite a lot in everyday life as well" (FS 62TB). Here the readers' attitude towards literature as an institution of high culture and their belief in the civilising (enlightening) mission of literature may be observed clearly. Literature is like a holy icon, one that should not be vulgarised. Behind such an attitude there is that elitist view of artistic texts that has dominated our literary culture for a long time, together with hierarchical oppositions between "high" and "low," or spoken and written language that are characteristic of the modern era. The so-called low style and "obscene literature" -- e.g., texts of Peeter Sauter, Kaur Kender, and others -- began penetrating Estonian prose as late as the mid-1990s, causing, by the way, quite a hot controversy within literary circles in 1997 and 1998. The peasant-like respectful attitude towards the written word arises partially from Estonia's comparatively short literary tradition, slightly older than one hundred years. Its roots may be traced back to the period of national awakening when the mother tongue and the written word played a central role in building national culture. Secondary school curricula in literature are also based on classic, "high-cultural" texts of a traditional approach. Therefore, the conservative attitude of some young people towards the institution of literature is understandable, although it seems somewhat surprising against the background of the rapid cultural changes of today. At this point, a typical example would be an excerpt from a young man's essay that was written in 1998: "In my opinion, it is written in a vulgar everyday slang that should be extremely 'in' with young people. At points it was even funny, but as I said, vulgar. Is contemporary art constituted by shitting into a jar?" (MS 69B).

In addition to the language and the unpleasant characters, the story was also criticised for its implausible plot and lack of motivation, in particular at the end of the story, and its superficial level of characterisation. Besides that, some young people found that the story did not constitute a whole as there was no climax or moment of surprise in the end; some were disturbed by its brevity, which left an impression of it being a fragment rather than a literary whole: "It didn't force me to think. It was so short that it didn't leave an impression of any kind. It was like a fragment from a longer story; it didn't work as a holistic story" (FS 86B). Nevertheless, many readers in our sample more or less liked the story and for the same reasons for which the majority derided it, i.e., precisely because of the language and the style used. In 1993, approximately every third respondent (9), and five years later a few more (14) took the young people's slang, the juiciness and novelty of the language, the compliance of the style with the contents, as well as the humour hidden

in the text, as positive features: "It was cool to read; I liked the slang ... but not the characters" (MS 36A); "In a way, it was written as if with a small dose of black humour" (MS 32A); "It was quite a normal thing, particularly in terms of its vocabulary everything was said explicitly" (MS 94B); "I liked the style, it was cool, such a novel and courageous one" (FS 67B); "A bit comic, such a slightly satirical story. A satire on contemporary society, maybe" (FS 86B).

If the slang provided a certain identifying handle for a number of young people, then Liksom's characters and their bleak world remained strange to them in both case studies, arousing aversion and disgust. The respondents very decisively distanced themselves from such a world. The story and the characters did not provide the readers with an opportunity either for empathy or identification, which is, again, a particularly important precondition for the appropriation of a work in the popular aesthetics (Bourdieu 32-34). The characters were sometimes even considered to be "abnormal," not to speak of such pejorative terms as "drunkard," "bitch," "soak," etc.

Relying on the readers' general attitude and criteria of evaluation, a dominant horizon of expectations or a model of "good prose" of the Estonian reader could be posited, consisting of expectations as follows. In general, it is assumed that good literature should have: 1) Proper and enjoyable literary language where there is no place for slang or "low" style; 2) The possibility for identification with the characters; the worlds of the characters and the readers should have points of contact; 3) A plausible depiction of reality; and 4) Psychological depth and credible characterisation. At the same time, however, some signs of change in these expectations can also be observed among the younger generation of readers. Surprisingly, many young people enjoyed the slang and the exuberant expression and appreciated the velocity and dynamism of the text. The new endings to the story written by the readers themselves also demonstrate that Liksom's text inspired young readers to write spirited alternate endings in a similar style even if the general assessment of the text in the interview was negative. What is particularly important, however, is that in comparing young people's attitude towards the story in the early and late 1990s, a clear shift in their literary horizon of expectations may be noticed, and especially in their attitude towards the language. Slang and coarse vocabulary disturbed and shocked the young readers of today substantially less than their peers from the first half of the decade: "Use of slang was pretty normal and natural in this case, although vulgarisms were a bit excessive, perhaps" (MS 69B). Thus, the attitude towards the language used in the story had become more tolerant and ambivalent. The reasons for this probably lie in the constantly increasing influence of media culture. The various media texts such as advertising, the news press, films, and television and media discourses that use more and more spoken language and slang are also making an impact on young people's literary perception. In addition to slang, a greater number of filmic and generally visual influences as compared to the earlier sample could also be detected in the essays of the young people themselves, particularly in the new endings to the story. Our data support the assumption that audio-visual culture and its various texts and their fictitious elements have quite rapidly begun to influence literary expectations of the younger reader generation. This is not very surprising when considering the rapid changes in the Estonians' media environment during the 1990s, particularly in the sphere of electronic media -- something that is also evident in our background survey. Satellite and cable television has reached Estonian homes and the time spent watching television has increased and the number of people having a VCR, personal computer, and internet connection has substantially grown (e.g., in terms of the spread of the internet, Estonia is one of the fastest-developing countries in Central and Eastern Europe).

### **Thematic Discourses and Cultural Stereotypes**

As the short story was so astonishing and unconventional, and did not provide any hints for its interpretation, it provoked the readers, in their search for meaning, to refer to an already familiar cultural repertoire (attitudes, stereotypes, discourses, and so on) in order to fill the "gaps" in the text. According to Jonathan Culler, the understanding of a text comes about through a process of naturalization in which the text is related to familiar discourses. It is a culturally determined operation of integrating the unknown into the known. Thus, the context in which culture is received is united with its relevant interpretive resources. The Liksom story was interpreted above all through its characters and events, as a reflection of reality, and not so much as a literary construct. But

which and whose reality was it that was perceived in the story? According to our data, there were several main thematic discourses in the short story: the story was either about a failed marriage, dealt with primarily only through paraphrasing the story; about relationships between men and women; about the life style of the bottom stratum of society or about modern man or modern youth. In most cases, these topics were considered very briefly in the essays, not particularly analytically, and they were often also intertwined in the responses of the same respondent.

It is worth emphasising that in the late 1990s the world described was associated by youth with "modern man" and with topics about the "lower class" much more than in the earlier study. The superficial attitude towards life typical of today was also considered more analytically. The critical attitude of the Estonian readers can be summarised as follows. Contemporary (young) people are superficial, indifferent, without a firm purpose in life, and without moral principles. They live only in the moment and for themselves, without giving a thought to the consequences of their actions: "It is the modern people who are being described here. ... People have lost correct value judgements. The worst thing is that they don't have even fallacies any more; the human of today or of the future doesn't have anything. Where strict ethical standards governed us before, there is emptiness now. The worst thing is that no one is even trying any more to struggle out of this state of a 'living corpse.' People are indifferent towards their future. ... I have the impression that the life motto of the modern being is just 'being in the moment'" (FS 75B). In treating such topics, much stereotypical placing and completion was used as strategies of interpretation (see Järve, Kamdrón and Papp 117-20). The cultural stereotypes that became evident in Liksom's readings are described below in more detail. In addition to the essays, the readers' data to the interview questions concerning the gender of the author of the story and the origin of the piece have also been used in our analysis.

Stereotypes may be treated as simplified judgements about the Other, shared by the given society/group and working as a sort of defence mechanism against the strange. In the background of speech there are always certain presuppositions self-evident and predominantly subconscious assumptions about how things normally work and what kinds of phenomena belong together (see Karttunen). Making the latter visible is one main task of cultural study. In our study, the data obtained made it possible to explain the following stereotypes that became evident in reception of the text, either explicitly or implicitly. To begin with, the stereotypes related to the gender roles and the couple's relationship in the story which were based on the stereotypical opposition of the active male and the passive female, as well as that of the strong male and the weak female. The meanings attached to Liksom's text were directed as a dominant presupposition according to the patriarchal role model and the images of femininity/masculinity related to it. According to this model, it is the man's responsibility in the first place to support the family and to earn a living while the woman, on the contrary, is expected, above all, to show warmth, sensitivity, and emotional intelligence. It was the male rather than the female who was also expected to show initiative in choosing a partner. Since in the given story this role scheme was reversed -- with the woman holding a job, picking up the man, proposing to him, and finally brutally killing him -- neither of the main characters found approval. Traditional gender stereotypes had a particular impact on the reception of the male character (the I-narrator's point of view perhaps also contributed to it). The man was reproached for his "unmanly" features of passivity, awkwardness, whimpering, and sensitivity, while the woman was again criticised for the "unwomanly" features of vulgarity, hardness, aggressiveness, etc. The weak and sensitive male figure particularly upset the young men for whom it was difficult to digest the "misery" of their gender.

In their new endings to the short story, a number of young people in both years of data acquisition attempted to make the story more acceptable to themselves by re-reversing Liksom's role scheme by making the male character more "masculine" (for example, "sought revenge against his wife," "flew away," "went to seek for a job," and so on) and the female character in turn more "feminine." Boys wished to restore the "men's honor" that they saw as being "shamed" by the author, either by giving the man revenge to the same extent or otherwise through initiating a magical change by means of a happy end, as with the birth of a child, for instance: "Things change dramatically when the couple gets a baby ... The husband pulls himself together, finds a job, con-



ducts his everyday business, brings in money to pay the rent, and supports his legal wedded wife in every way. The woman also improves herself; she stops going to the pubs and having parties. The girl's outlook and their understanding of a decent marriage and the building of a family change as well. ... They make a common decision to stay together, to raise their child to adulthood and to give her a good education" (MS 85B); "After getting married, the woman realises that she also has responsibilities to her husband. She gives up alcohol, and starts cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, etc. The man, noticing that his wife is so diligent, also goes to work and bring home the bacon" (FS 40A). Evidently, readers in our samples naturalised Liksom's story predominantly from traditional role models. Gender equality in terms of men's and women's rights and responsibilities in the context of contemporary feminist models was very seldom considered. Neither could particular signs of weakening be observed in this dominant role model and old gender stereotypes (in the representations of the "man" and the "woman"). But perhaps the five-year interval is too short for this. Some young girls who were questioned in 1998 went even so far in their traditional role expectations that they accused the female character in the story not just of materialism but also of laziness, entirely ignoring the fact -- disclosed early in the text -- that it was actually the man who led a leisurely life: "The woman hoped that her husband would do the housework, bring in money, and basically maintain her. This woman didn't even expect love. ... The woman provoked disgust in me. She was so lazy and so careless that she expected only that her husband indeed had to labour for her benefit and she herself could do whatever she liked" (FS 78B).

Several other gender stereotypes also became evident from the data with regard to the language and style of the short story. Thus, for example, it was assumed on the grounds of the latter that the story had probably been written by a male author. It appears from the data that brutal language and an unemotional and laconic style are definitely something that belong to the men's world while this in turn also points to the stereotypical opposition of the rational male and the emotional female as an underlying assumption. There were also many class-bound stereotypical distinctions made in the interpretations of the story. The world depicted in the story was attributed quite unanimously to the so-called "lower classes," and the characters were deemed to represent the "bottom stratum": "down-and-outs," "drunkards," "drifters with insufficient education," and so on. The stereotype of a "bottom stratum" includes in Estonian society such attributes as rough language and abundant drinking, as well as aggression, low morals and living standards, and indifference towards oneself and others. Here, the course of thinking is the following: as the behaviour of the characters of the story complied neither with traditional role expectations nor with generally approved social norms, then we were obviously dealing with the bottom of society vs. decent people. This kind of stereotypical placing enabled readers to "explain" the characters' behaviour relatively easily, and also to draw a clear boundary between "us" and "them" by defining themselves implicitly as "better," as "normal" people: "In my opinion, this is about the life of some 'drop-out' ... As I do not interact with such cast-offs myself, I don't have any positive attitude towards them either. Such figures usually belong to the lower classes, of which I wouldn't consider myself a member. This is evident already from their style of speech; they used too many slang words and obscenities. I do sometimes, too, but not that much" (MS 93B). Class- and social-group related stereotypes in turn intertwined with national ones. Namely, in a number of cases, the "bottom stratum" was associated with local Russians, either explicitly or implicitly. The theme interview also invited the readers to guess at the origin of the short story's author. In answering the question "Can you see any nation-specific elements in the story?" nearly half of the survey subjects failed to associate the depicted reality with a certain nationality or country. Rather, it was associated with the lifestyle and milieu of the contemporary Western world. It was assumed that the story could be placed into any developed country, including Estonia. From among specific regions, Europe, the Nordic countries, and North America were mentioned more frequently.

Among nation-specific stereotypes, the negative stereotype of Russians became most clearly evident. Nearly one third of the subjects in both samples (8 and 11, respectively) associated the depicted world with the environment and life-style of Estonian-Russians -- although not spontaneously but when prompted by the relevant interview question. A Russian's stereotypical image contained attributes similar to the "bottom stratum": "abundant use of obscene language and alco-

hol," "impulsiveness," "aggression," "violence," and "one-day mentality": "Yeah, it's about Russians. Indeed, the story does hark to the Kopli district that is the place where such tramps and bums come together. As a matter of fact, such activities may be witnessed there all the time" (MS 93B); "I don't know, they could only be Russians -- it's their temperament and their life-style, one booze-up after another" (MS 32A). In addition, several indirect references to local Russians were made in the essays: "This kind of life in Estonia really causes trouble. One can read similar news items from the police reviews in the papers every day where a drunk Nadya hits her husband Mikhail on the head with an axe during the course of a family argument" (MS 74B). While following the changes in national reference frameworks, it became evident, surprisingly, that Russians were associated with the Otherness perceived in the text even more than earlier. Besides Russians, repeated references were also made in 1998 to Americans and/or to North America (6), Estonia (4), and the Nordic countries, mainly Finland (3). Under "Americanism," however, it was not so much a specific national stereotype but rather the general milieu and a dynamic plot that reminded some respondents of what they had seen in action movies: "Maybe something American -- rapid tempo, a lot of slang and violence. Actually, I don't know that much of them, just suppose on the ground of movies" (FS 76B).

Now the question arises: why was it Russians who were associated with the depicted lifestyle and the "bottom stratum?" On the one hand, it may be a kind of reaction to the long-term Russification policy of the Soviet era (for more detail on this, see Järve, Kamdron, and Papp 120-22) and the tensions between the ethnic groups that arose from this. On the other hand, however, we cannot forget that in post-communist Estonia, ethnicity is closely related to class structure. Just like in the other Baltic States, the Russian-speaking population formed a majority of the working class and military institutions. After the collapse of big industries and the withdrawal of the Soviet Army that followed the change of the political as well as economic system, the Russian-speaking minority (which forms nearly one third of the population) has lost its status and become one of the main risk groups of "losers" that provide supply to the ranks of the unemployed, the illegal residents, and the poor. In sum, in the production of meaning to the text by the subjects of the surveys, the traditional role attitudes as well as class-related and national stereotypes, prejudices and distinctions play an important role. And, significantly, these old handles of interpretation were even further enhanced in the 1990s. Who was the actual Other in the depicted world to the eyes of the young? In the first place, the foul-mouthed, drinking, harsh, and violent female who did not meet with the traditional role expectations, and the weak and passive male. Much on the same basis, Otherness was in turn identified with an uneducated, vulgar and morally degraded "bottom layer" of society with which no one was willing to have any business whatsoever.

#### **Changes in the Contextual Frames of Reference**

Reading involves contextualization, relating the read material to other texts and contexts. Analysis of the reference framework used in interpreting the short story indicates several important changes that took place in meaning production for the text. First, in the sense of the setting, the story was interpreted in the late 1990s substantially more in the context of contemporary Estonia with its characteristic social problems (growing stratification, crime levels, etc.). In the 1993 reader respondent essays, the young people made just one reference to local context, while five years later, there were about ten of them. On the other hand, the story's milieu now was more reminiscent of America to the young readers. Secondly, significant shifts in the intertextual frame of reference also stand out. The world represented was treated substantially more in the context of media culture and less in the literary context. This is not a big surprise if we take into account the declining trend of the status of print culture and the powerful expansion of electronic culture and the audiovisual media, which have taken place in the everyday lives of young people during the last decade, something that was also indicated by the background survey. Just as in judging the characters, the intertextual framework was also created mainly on the basis of the language and events of the short story. In the responses to the interview question "Does the story remind you of any book, comic strip, film, etc. that you have read or seen before?" there was just one reference to literature (punk poetry) at the end of the decade, while there had been six of the kind before. Now the story reminded the young people much more of police chronicles in the papers and parti-



cularly of movies and television serials they had seen where bad language and violence were quite usual. At this point, fast-paced Anglo-American movies were often referred to, for instance, the English cult film *Trainspotting* -- which reflected the life of young drug addicts -- was repeatedly mentioned, as well as, more generally, American action movies. Thus it may be inferred that although the story still remained strange as a piece of literary text to a majority of the readers, the constructed meanings were, however, more familiar than before in the sense of a socio-cultural framework. In terms of cultural geography, the Otherness perceived in the short story was placed either very close (into the local context), or then very far away to America, which nevertheless seemed familiar because of the reader respondents' media reality.

### Reading and Values as Cross-Cultural Comparison

What follows now is an attempt to find out those more general value systems that guided the meaning production with the reader respondents. In order to point them out more clearly, the reception materials of Estonia and Finland from the year 1993 are compared. These countries may be ethnically and geographically close, but are different in terms of historical development and levels of modernisation. Despite a number of common features between the countries such as general negative attitudes towards the story and its characters, similar literary horizon, etc., substantial differences became evident in the ways in which the characters were approached. The latter matter, in turn, refers to a possible difference between value models in the cultures under comparison.

The following analysis relies on a joint research work performed in co-operation with Urpo Kovalala (see Järve and Kovalala). First, the character descriptions were explored by picking out all phrases and adjectives connected with the female character and/or both the main characters from the respondents' essays. A similar approach, used to explain the readers' value systems through character descriptions in short stories, has been applied in several socio-psychological reading studies (see, e.g., Rosenberg; Halász). Comparing the resulting lists of personality trait terms used in describing the main characters by young respondents, it becomes clear that although in both countries the descriptions had predominantly negative undertones, they differed substantially from one another in terms of their contents (see Table 1). The Estonian reader respondents underlined the external, behavioural, and social-status related features of the characters ("drunkard," "vulgar," "uneducated," "asocial," "uncivilised," "underdeveloped," "stupid," etc.) to a greater extent than the Finnish respondents. Besides that, the female character's "unwomanliness" and "aggressiveness" and the male character's "laziness" and "awkwardness" were emphasised more strongly. In the given context, all of these characteristics had a pejorative meaning. The Finnish respondents put the main characters' inner, personality-related features on the foreground where they emphasised in the first place the heroes' "indifference," "carelessness," "insensitivity," "lack of responsibility and conscience," "self-centredness," "internal lack of confidence," etc. The Finnish respondents' descriptions also had a more neutral tone than those of the Estonians (for example, they spoke of "problems with alcohol" instead of the "drunkard"). When all the references to external, behavioural features are summarised on the one hand, and all the internal, personality-related features on the other, it becomes evident that in Estonia, the former type was clearly dominant while in Finland, on the contrary, the latter type. The number of characteristics related to the third type (ideas and values) turned out to be more or less equal in the case of essays of young people of both countries (see also Järve and Kovalala).

**Table 1** (Personality trait terms used in describing the female character and/or both characters in the essays of Estonian and Finnish young readers as mentioned at least by two respondents, essays 1 and 2)

Estonia 1993 (N=30)		Finland 1993 (N=30)	
Alcoholic, drunkard	10	Indifferent	12
Vulgar (language, manners)	10	Without feelings	8
From the bottom stratum*	5	Self-centred, egotistic	4
Uneducated	4	Lacking conscience	4

Thoughtless, impulsive	4	Cruel, pitiless, brutal	4
Cruel, pitiless, brutal	4	Insecure	4
Unintelligent, stupid	4	Irresponsible	4
Indifferent	3	Thoughtless, impulsive	4
Aimless	3	Superficial	3
Corrupt, depraved	3	Immoral	3
Uncivilised	3	Cold hearted	3
Unfeminine (manners and language)	2	Uneducated	2
Violent, aggressive	2	Aimless	2
Frivolous, light minded	2	Childish, infantile	2
Prostitute, whore	2	Eremitic	2
Self-centred, egotistic	2	Arrogant	2
Lacking conscience	2	Determinate, with initiative	2
Acting from material needs only	2	Loser	2

\*incl. bum, asocial person, derelict, dregs of the working class, etc. Estonia 1993 (N = 30), Finland 1993 (N = 30)

The same differences were also present in the descriptions of the male character, where the narrator's perspective was mainly accepted in both countries. Again, the differences between the samples were the same: the predominance of socio-behavioural traits (e.g., "alcoholic," "from the bottom stratum," "uneducated") in the Estonian sample and of socio-emotional traits in the Finnish sample ("indifferent," "insecure"). As to ability and performance, the Finns used a somewhat greater number of terms indicating a kind of empathy ("poor thing," "helpless"), while the young Estonian readers referred more to activity ("lazy, idle," "whining"). On the basis of the differences in character descriptions, it is possible to construct the following schematic cultural models used by the readers in the reception of the story and the characters.

**Table 2** (Cultural models in character description)

<i>The Estonian model</i>	<i>The Finnish model</i>
Education, cultivation	Human relations
Breeding	Sensitivity, care for others
Decency, neatness	Feelings
Good manners and good language	Security
Moderation	High morality
Achievement	Belonging
Diligence	Depth (in relations)
Social hierarchy	Responsibility
Stress on the socio-behavioural characteristics, competence and achievement	Stress on the psychological characteristics, inner life

Briefly put, the Estonian respondents' character interpretations refer to the cultural model where education, breeding, obedience of norms, moderation, achievement, diligence, and social status are all highly valued. The Finns, in turn, paid more attention to the inner world of the characters, focusing more on psychological characteristics. The same cultural model was still valid in Estonia five years later. As before, the external, behavioural characteristics of the heroes were in a clear majority now as well (see **Table 1**). But in addition, more attention than before was now paid to personal features, particularly by the girls. They demonstrated a somewhat more empathic attitude towards the female character, now pointing out also her naiveté and unhappiness, as well as her courage. Another difference became evident in the stance with which the characters were approached. The essay materials were also compared from a slightly different angle by taking types of causal attribution from social cognition theory as the basis. Here, dispositional (or internal) and situational (or external) attributions may be distinguished (on the use of these in the interpretation of characters, see e.g. Culpeper 342; Pollard-Gott 499-505). In the first case, people were more inclined to see the causes of behaviour/faults in personality traits (be it the observer him- or herself, or another person). In the second case, the causes were located in external factors: circumstances, bad luck, and so on. In judging the activities of other people, the cause is rather shif-

ted on to them (internal attribution), while in the case of the person him- or herself, or his/her loved ones, external attribution is attempted. It emerged from the essay responses of the young people that while internal attribution was used more or less equally in both the comparison groups, external attribution was applied much more often among the Finns than among Estonians. The former also saw unfavourable social conditions, the growth environment and/or just bad luck as reasons for the events described in the short story, and they did not confine themselves to merely blaming the characters.

According to Pollard-Gott, situational attributions imply an actor's stance towards the characters, while dispositional attributions in turn refer to an observer's stance (512-13). Further, Pollard-Gott points out that "observers" tend to put the cause more often down to dispositional variables or the person's traits. The former refers to an empathic or inclusive attitude, the latter to an exclusive attitude, respectively. In other words, different distancing from the characters may be seen behind the above attribution differences. Although the Finns viewed the lifestyle presented in the short story reproachfully, their approach to the characters was much more tolerant and empathic compared to that of the Estonians. They at least tried to build a bridge to the characters in order to overcome their strangeness, while the Estonians treated them predominantly as an out-cast group and turned their back on them. This may be well illustrated by an excerpt from a female student's essay: "It's about totally degraded people who have managed to wash their primary education out of their brains with alcohol. If I had to do with such people in my life, I would stay far away from them because of a feeling of disgust" (FS 52A). The abundant class-related distinctions in the Estonian reception materials already provide evidence of an exclusive stance. The distinction between "them" and "us" is in turn considered to be a characteristic feature of collectivist (as opposed to individualistic) culture. Triandis points out that collectivists stress and notice differences between the in-group and the out-group, while individualists treat people first of all as individuals, and not so much as group-members (160).

The differences considered above, and also several other differences in interpretation, refer clearly to different value systems in the countries under comparison. At the same time, the results of the given case studies derived from oral statements of the readers, coincide with the results of several extensive comparative studies on values (see Inglehart; Schwartz; Verkasalo, Daun, and Niit). For example, a comparative study on values performed by Roland Inglehart (1995) in 43 countries proves that materialistic scarcity values -- hard work, money, fighting spirit, respect for hierarchies, intolerance towards otherness, and traditional gender roles -- were dominant in Estonia in the early 1990s, as in other post-communist countries. Finland, as one of the Nordic welfare states, belonged to a group of countries characterised by post-materialistic security values: equality, fraternity, leisure, tolerance, independence. Results of other comparative studies also show some striking differences between value systems of different countries. So, for example, a cross-national study of universal value orientations based on Schwartz's instrument and carried out among Estonian, Finnish, and Swedish university students in 1992 (see Verkasalo, Daun, and Niit) indicated that Estonians gave higher ratings to achievement values (intelligence, success, capability) and power values (attainment of social status and prestige, wealth and authority), than the Finns and the Swedes. Thus, the divergence in value systems and gender roles, which also found expression in our reception materials, helps us to explain why the Estonian readers could not tolerate the characters of the story, and tended to take a rather exclusive position, keeping them down and out. While trying to establish the causes of this divergence, the different historical experiences and present social situations of the countries under comparison cannot be overlooked. According to Inglehart (399), there was a significant shift from scarcity values towards security or post-materialistic values in many industrial countries during the 1970s and 1980s. These developments, he points out, presuppose, alongside with economic security, a stable and long-lived democracy. On these grounds, the differences between the countries in cultural models and value systems may be explained in terms of both different historical background and democratic experience, as well as divergence in the state of modernisation and present social situation in the two countries. Partially, the shadows of the nearly 50-year-long totalitarian regime and the Soviet mentality that suppressed anything that diverged from the "norm," could be seen in the Estonian

readers' readiness to place other people into certain social groups on the basis of their behavioural traits. The breakthrough that followed the restoration of independence in the Estonian society in 1991 may be characterised as a transition from the Soviet pseudo-equality and authoritarian collectivism to a hard-line competitive capitalism with a new kind of social hierarchy. The governing social model with its liberal market economy is essentially different from the model of a wealthy welfare state with a strong state social security system that Finland (and other Nordic countries) follows. Estonia likes to identify itself with the Nordic countries, but according to social scientists' assessments, Estonia has in reality moved even further away from their welfare model during the post-communist era.

In current Estonian political discourse, the successful economic reforms are often highlighted, but the social price paid for them has been given much less publicity. Behind the façade of a successful small post-communist state, there is also another Estonia, one of growing stratification and deprivation and other serious social problems. Today's Estonia is a society of competition which is oriented towards success, and in which the (state) social security system is weak and the responsibility for survival has been assigned mostly to the individual. All this has made the problems related to social status a particularly salient issue. The strengthening competition in the labour market, the strive for upward mobility in life (in order not to "fall down" the social ladder), is probably one fact having influence on why the opposition related to social hierarchy played such an important role in Estonian youth's reading of Liksom. Thus, figuratively speaking, young Estonians and Finns had different positions behind the negotiating table in their dialogue with the text, which also made an impact on the approaches because of different value systems and cultural backgrounds. At this point, however, the effect of the cultural context of the text cannot be underestimated: the fact that the Estonians were presented a translated piece, while the Finns had to tackle a text that belonged to their own culture. The world depicted was therefore simply more familiar to the latter. This is evidenced already by the fact that nearly all the Finnish readers recognised the characters correctly as Finns, although very few of them could guess who the author was (see Koskimaa and Jokinen). As a result, the Finns possessed more knowledge that was useful for the interpretation of the events, and were on the other hand also more willing to do so. A number of other comparative reading studies have proven that interpretations of a domestic text are more varied than those of a foreign text, because the readers are equipped with more comprehensive knowledge and experience for treating the issues reflected in the particular text (see Leenhardt and Józsa; Leenhardt; Koskimaa).

### **Conclusion**

When talking about current cultural changes, theorists tend to point out the continuously growing individualisation and disintegration of fixed identities as trends characteristic of the postmodern era. Established social bonds and tokens of belonging to national, class-based, gender, and other identities are weakening and leading towards greater plurality of identities and flexible self-reflection. These transformations do not occur overnight, but in a coexistence of the new and the old. The readings of the Liksom story collected in Estonia, however, do not support these notions particularly. In the cultural repertoire used by the young readers in order to make sense of the strange text and to construct/locate the Otherness/Own-ness, the traditional role attitudes, class-bound and national distinctions continue to play an important role. Neither could significant signs of change towards the erosion of master narratives be observed in cultural codes. In terms of fundamental issues, young people's attitudes were surprisingly similar in both samples and gender groups compared. The traditional pattern of marital relationships also has strong status in the eyes of young people, just like before. The family and the marriage institution were looked upon with full seriousness and with severe reproach of the female main character's careless attitude towards her marriage. Therefore, in several respects, our findings indicate reservations rather than support to the above-mentioned theoretical notions about cultural trends. Changes in cultural deep structures will take time. Liksom's text contained messages that are potentially characteristic of different types of society. Although the Estonian readers did notice reflections of a postmodern lifestyle hidden in the text, they still did not accept the hedonism, superficiality, aimlessness, ambivalence of gender roles, etc. They rebelled against it as a depressive false mirror of the times. At the same

time, the characters were seen above all as losers who had failed in life and were degraded, while the respondents themselves were distanced from them as "better" people. The ease with which they did so indicates the cultural model dominant in Estonia, where achievement, education, social hierarchy, breeding, good manners, moderation and other such behavioural characteristics have a strong status. Aside from that, several elements of change that refer to a postmodern cultural condition could be detected in the interpretive repertoire of the young people. The main shifts in the reception of the story concerned the contextualisation of the story that indicated the growing importance of media culture and local socio-cultural context for the production of meaning. The young readers' new endings to the short story also contained more postmodern parody, irony, playfulness, and filmic loans than before. Our study once more proved that the dialogue between the cultural backgrounds of the text and the reader is a complex process where a number of factors meet behind a negotiating table, criss-crossing each other. In addition, a certain mixture of the old and the new (predominantly the modern, but sometimes also of the premodern and some tendrils of the postmodern) may be found in this multi-voiced negotiation.

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