


# The Interplay of Art, Occultism and Emancipation

## Subversive Female Perspectives in Tyra Kleen's Life and Work at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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In the early 1900s, the Swedish noblewoman Tyra Kleen (1874–1951) was a highly productive artist, author, suffragette and occult seeker. Although Kleen's esoteric and feminist interests have to a limited extent been considered in previous research, these aspects have not received sufficient attention, either in relation to her art/writing or as relevant interests in their own right. Research on Tyra Kleen, in general, is scarce, especially on her identity beyond an artist and author. Therefore, this study focuses on the interplay between Kleen's engagement in the women's suffrage movement and occultism, and her creative output around 1900. By examining how these overlapping spheres of interest informed one another, this study aims to situate and comprehend Kleen more fully within her contemporary cultural, social and political context. It highlights the spiritual, political and social conflation of Kleen's diverse emancipatory roles, and examines, among other factors, the importance of her companionship with Ellen Key in this context.

### Introduction

In the early 1900s, events in the life of the Swedish noblewoman Tyra Kleen (1874–1951) came thick and fast. In addition to being a highly productive artist and author—with a great number of exhibitions across Europe and several book projects in progress—Kleen increasingly immersed herself in both the Swedish women's suffrage movement and various occult circles, both within and beyond Sweden. Her diary entries vividly demonstrate these multiple interests. Notes such as the following are just a few examples:

"Stockholm, 21 September 1897: At 11 o'clock, I went to the women's congress [...]."

"Rome, 23 December 1902: Then at Mrs [Cooper-Oakley's], where I met some pleasant Theosophists."

"Rome, 11 November 1903: Starting to write a post about women's peace."

"Stockholm, 20 May 1908: At 7:30, to Kuylenstierna, 43 Strandvägen, for an occult gathering. Very pleasant."

"Stockholm, 7 April 1909: We went into the city to visit a [clair]voyant who read the cards."

“Stockholm, 28 May 1909: Spoke about occultism at home.”

“Stockholm, 18 June 1909: Back at 7:30 for the suffrage meeting in Idunsparken [...]”

“Paris, 14 December 1909: In the evening, a hypnotic séance [...]”<sup>1</sup>

Her diaries give clear testimony to the extensive network that she built up in both Stockholm and other European cities such as Rome, London and Paris within artistic, occult and women’s rights circles. However, previous research has focused exclusively on Tyra Kleen’s artistic and literary work. While occult and women’s rights engagements have to a limited extent been considered in interpretations of her creative production, they have not been given sufficient attention, either in relation to her art/writing or as relevant interests in their own right.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Translated from the Swedish entries of Tyra Kleen’s transcribed diaries from 1897, 1902, 1903, 1908, 1909: “Stockholm, 21.9.1897: Kl. 11 gick jag på kvinnokongressen [...]”, “Rom, 23.12.1902: sedan hos Mrs [Cooper-Oakley] där jag träffade trevliga teosofier”, “Rom, 11.11.1903: Börjar skriva ett inlägg om kvinnofrid”, “Stockholm, 20.5.1908: Kl ½8 till Kuylenstierna, 43 Strandvägen på ockultistisk bjudning. Mycket trevligt”, “Stockholm, 7.4.1909: Vi foro ner till staden till en [clai]rvoyant som spådde i kort”, “Stockholm, 28.5.1909: Talade ockultism hemma” “Stockholm, 18.6.1909: Tillbaka kl ½8 till rösträtt i Idunsparken [...]”, “Paris, 14.12.1909: På kvällen hypnotisk seans [...]”.
- 2 The most comprehensive study to date is, to my knowledge, my Ph.D. dissertation, which focuses on the ideal of an androgynous inner and outer state in, among others, Tyra Kleen’s art, an ideal closely related to the occult programme of Joséphin Péladan and the Symbolist *Salons de la Rose+Croix*, held in Paris between 1892 and

This study therefore focuses on the interplay between Tyra Kleen’s involvement in the women’s suffrage movement, her engagement with occultism and her creative output around 1900. By examining how these spheres of interest co-existed and intersected, it aims to more fully position and comprehend Kleen within her contemporary cultural, social and political context. What critical female perspectives on society and the art world were possibly expressed by Kleen?

This question is answered by mapping Kleen’s affiliations with key networks, associations and individuals; examining her self-fashioning and lifestyle; analysing a selected group of her artworks and highlighting her position within, and response to, currents of ideas of the *fin de siècle*. To this end, the study draws on a wide range of materials—including archival sources by or related to Kleen, her visual and literary work, her journalistic writing and magazine and newspaper articles about her. Although this study is largely based on an in-depth investigation of several primary sources—such as the accessible material from Kleen’s artist estate, including Kleen’s transcribed diaries from 1895 to 1915 (with the exception of the missing year 1906)<sup>3</sup>

1897 (Bruchmüller 2022). Further convincing studies are the one made by the scholar of religion Per Faxneld (2020; 2021). Karin Ström Leander (Åbo Akademi University, Finland) is currently working on a Ph.D. dissertation on Tyra Kleen’s creative production in relation to her travels to East Asia, Greece and Egypt, and the ways in which these journeys informed her esoteric perspectives.

- 3 Tyra Kleen bequeathed her estate to the House of Nobility (Riddarhuset) in Stockholm upon her death in 1951 with the

and twelve letters written by Ellen Key to Tyra Kleen, along with material consulted at the National Library of Sweden, it is also greatly affected by the limited access to and limitations within the available empirical material. The entire and comprehensive scope of Tyra Kleen's artist estate has remained inaccessible to study since 2017. Moreover, the accessed material offers few insights into occult, feminist and creative theories, ideas, opinions and other content-related aspects Kleen engaged with.

### **Tyra Kleen's feminist and cultural networks in Stockholm in 1897-1898**

Around 1900, Tyra Kleen's career as an artist began to gain momentum. Following her artistic apprenticeship at women artists' academies in Dresden, Karlsruhe and Munich (1891-1895) and at Paris's private art academies (1895-1897), she established herself as an illustrator in Sweden. Like many aspiring women artists at the turn of the twentieth century, Kleen was a noblewoman whose financial background enabled her to pursue a professional artistic education. However, establishing oneself as a professional woman artist still involved a transgression of prevailing female norms. The role of the artist

stipulation that it remain sealed for 50 years, that is until 2001. However, since 2017, Kleen's artist estate has been unavailable for my study due to its placement at Valinge gård, where it is taken care of by the custodian Kerstin Gullstrand Hermelin. From Gullstrand Hermelin I received transcribed digital versions of Kleen's diaries, written in shorthand by Kleen, as well as twelve letters as digital versions from Ellen Key to Tyra Kleen. I do not know, however, how many letters by Key are included in Kleen's estate in total.

in the late nineteenth century was heavily coded as male, and although an increasing number of women—the so-called “New Woman”—were asserting their presence in public and professional life, such ambitions remained transgressive (see Silverman 1991, 149; 1989, 63). As one of these “New Women”, Tyra Kleen sought profession and independence throughout life, remaining unmarried and having no children.<sup>4</sup>

When she debuted as an illustrator in the end of 1897 at Gernandts förlag, it was with her work for the Swedish edition of the South African author and women's rights activist Olive Schreiner's *Dreams* (*Drömmar*). This collection of allegorical short stories deals with the inferior and disadvantaged role of women within society limited and controlled by men, as I argue.<sup>5</sup> Thus, this debut work reflects her critical view on women's position within society, which is something that she was already concerned with as an art student. Her diary from her sojourn in Munich in 1895 demonstrates, for instance, her active involvement as a member of the

4 The term “New Woman” is primarily associated with the late-nineteenth-century middle-class woman who subverted contemporary gender norms by entering the public sphere and becoming independent through pursuing a professional education and career. Although Tyra Kleen's way of becoming a professional artist, author, journalist and even women's suffragette—as a noblewoman—did not entail a significant shift in her financial independence (unlike for many middle-class women), she nonetheless challenged prevailing gender roles through her professional pursuits. For this reason, she is regarded in this study as a “New Woman”.

5 For more information on Tyra Kleen's illustrations for this book project, see Bruchmüller 2020.

“Künstlerinnenverein” (“Women Artists’ Association”), for example visiting a lecture held by the German suffragette Marie Stritt,<sup>6</sup> which Kleen calls “a champion of emancipation” in her diary from January 1895 (Kleen, 12 January 1895).

Alongside this debut began Kleen’s involvement within the Swedish women’s suffrage movement. This engagement persisted throughout the following years and was also soon combined with her engagement with the peace movement.

Kleen was one of the participants of the “Scandinavian Women’s Conference”, held 21–23 September 1897 in Stockholm in connection with The General Art and Industrial Exposition of Stockholm, organised by the recently founded Swedish Women’s National Federation (Svenska Kvinnors Nationalförbund SKN) (af Petersens 2006, 90). This conference was an important forum for the Swedish women’s (bourgeois) suffrage movement, which was organising itself for the first time and received great media attention (af Petersens 2006, 88, 119). Tyra Kleen participated on each of the three days and encountered—as



Figure 1. Tyra Kleen, *Portrait of Ellen Key*, 1.10.1902, print of a red charcoal drawing, Centraltryckeriet Stockholm, Riddarhuset/Valinge gård. Image: Bobo Lindblad Studio, Lindblad Studio, license CC0.

it seems from her diary—both already familiar and new women suffragettes (Kleen 1897, 21–23 September 1897). Among the latter belonged Ellen Key. Key (1849–1926) was one of the speakers at the conference in her role as the co-founder of the “Nya IDUN” during the last day.<sup>7</sup> It is likely that Kleen listened to her speech. Other speeches that she listened to were about Handarbetets Vänners Verksamhet,

6 This lecture “Die Frau gehört ins Haus” (“The woman belongs in the house”) was a prominent lecture with an ironically meant title, in which Stritt demands more women to join the women’s suffrage movement and points out women’s better education as a necessity for women’s participation in professional life equal to men’s.

7 See “Program vid Svenska Kvinnornas Nationalförbunds Konferens” (af Petersens 2006, 103). Originally published in *Dagny. Tidningen för Svenska Kvinnorörelsen*, 1897.

Kvinnoklubbens idé, and how the women's suffrage movement can have a meaningful impact on culture,<sup>8</sup> which were two overlapping fields that Kleen as an emerging woman artist identified with.

Alongside Kleen's participation in the Scandinavian Women's Conference, Kleen frequently interacted with the author Gustaf af Geijerstam, working as a literary advisor for Gernandts förlag, which published the aforementioned Swedish edition of *Dreams (Drömmar)* at the end of 1897 with Kleen's illustration work.<sup>9</sup> Geijerstam commissioned Kleen for several other book projects of Gernandts förlag over the following years. Kleen's professional collaboration with Geijerstam also led to private socialising such as an evening festivity at the Geijerstams', where Kleen met Ellen Key again, or for the first time properly, in November 1897 (Kleen, 7 November 1897). Through Geijerstam and Key, Kleen encountered two key figures of Stockholm's cultural establishment, both well acquainted with—and in Key's case also contributing to—the lively public debate on Theosophy that flourished in the late 1880s and 1890s within Swedish intellectual circles.<sup>10</sup> At that time, Key had not yet published her works *Beauty for All* (1899) and *The Century of the Child* (1900), which would soon bring her

international recognition. Following their encounter at the Geijerstams', Kleen and Key began spending much time together, initially in Stockholm but also in Rome around 1900, which served as Kleen's base between 1898 and 1906.<sup>11</sup> They also maintained a regular epistolary exchange, dominated by mutual interest in and support for each other's ongoing work, thoughts and standpoints.<sup>12</sup> For the development of their companionship, their social engagement and shared identity as suffragettes was crucial, as I argue.

Shortly after their acquaintance in Stockholm, Kleen began renting a studio in the upper-middle-class residential area of Villastan (at Villagatan 12), placing her both geographically and socially close to Key's home at Valhallavägen 49, as well as to other cultural middle-class homes, which were of relevance for Stockholm's women's suffrage movement (Bedoire 2017, 142).<sup>13</sup> Villastan was the place where the so-called "Nya Idun" gathered at Calla Curman's home (the Curmanska villa), a stone's throw

8 See af Petersens 2006, 103 and Tyra Kleen's transcribed diary from 22.9.1897: "From 10 to 12 am to the women' congress [...]."

9 See for instance Tyra Kleen's transcribed diary entry from 23.9.1897: "Was at the women's congress before noon, then at Gei[j]erstam."

10 In the late 1880s, a debate arose between Carl von Bergen and Karl af Geijerstam, Gustaf af Geijerstam's brother, in which Key and Viktor Rydberg, among others, also participated. See Jansson 2023, 243.

11 Kleen's diaries, together with Key's letters to Kleen, testify to their socialising in Rome in 1898, 1900 and 1901.

12 Twelve letters/postcards by Ellen Key to Tyra Kleen were accessible (1900–1922) but unfortunately only two letters from Tyra Kleen to Ellen Key, dated 1904 and 1922. Taken together, however, Key's responses make it evident that there must have been significantly more letters from Kleen to Key.

13 Tyra Kleen rented a studio at Villagatan 12 from 11 November 1897 to 25 May 1898; see Tyra Kleen's transcribed diaries. She often combined visiting her friend Ellen Key with working at her studio; see for instance Tyra Kleen's transcribed diary entry from 14 November 1897: "Fm hos Ellen Key, sedan i ateliern och arbetade."/ "Morning at Ellen Key's, then in the studio and worked."





Figure 2 (above). Tyra Kleen on the roof top of her studio in Rome dressed in a reform dress, date unknown. Image: Riddarhuset/Valinge gård, license CC0.



Figure 3. Tyra Kleen next to her bicycle, dressed in bloomers and a straw hat, along with a dachshund, 1900, photograph by Karin Söderlund, Riddarhuset/Valinge gård. Image: Bobo Lindblad Studio, license CC0.



Figure 4 (on left). Tyra Kleen, *Self-Portrait with Pince-nez and Bow Tie*, 12.11.1901, charcoal drawing, Riddarhuset/Valinge gård. Image: Bobo Lindblad Studio, license CC0.



Figure 5 (on right). Tyra Kleen dressed as a man, Munich 1895. Image: Riddarhuset/Valinge gård, license CC0.

from Kleen's studio. Kleen became a frequent and active participant in this cultural society for women, which was founded in 1885 by, among others, Ellen Key and Calla Curman, from 1897 and onward, probably through or at least simultaneously with encountering Key. She became a member of this society, closely tied to the Swedish women's suffrage movement, in April 1898, and exhibited her art multiple times from December 1897 and onwards.<sup>14</sup> Therewith, she strengthened and widened her position within Stockholm's suffragette network.

Closely associated with the "Nya Idun" was the Swedish Dress Reform Association (Svensk dräktreformförening), founded in 1886 with the aim of promoting greater comfort, health and functionality in women's clothing. As photographs and diary entries testify, Kleen was herself a proponent of dress reform around 1900, purchasing and wearing a *reformliv* ("a modified corsage"), reform dresses and even bloomers (fig. 2).<sup>15</sup> Kleen was a woman cyclist<sup>16</sup> (fig. 3) and included male-connoted clothing items in her wardrobe, called cross-dressing, such as in her *Self-Portrait with Pince-nez and Bow Tie* from 1901 (fig. 4), which like the aforementioned aspects all accord with the "New Woman" (Silverman

1991, 149). Therewith, her self-fashioning clearly expressed her suffrage identity, while also highlighting her artistic identity, since reform dress and more comfortable and natural women's fashion were also key features of the artistic dress movement (Cunningham 2003, 103, 124). In fact, she went even further in transgressing contemporary female gender norms. According to her diaries, she occasionally appeared dressed as a man at gatherings in Munich, Paris, Valinge (Sweden) and Rome during the 1890s and early 1900s (fig. 5) (Kleen 1895, 1896, 1898, 1902). These events, often held within artistic circles or in connection with carnival festivities, offered spaces where she could explore and perform a masculinity more freely than in other public contexts, for instance in Paris in February 1895, when she wrote in her diary: "I was a painting boy" (Kleen, 19 February 1895). This staging of herself as a man artist was, as I argue, a bold feminist intervention, both strengthening her position within artistic circles and simultaneously subverting them from within.

In 1900, Key calls Kleen "a radical beast" ("ett radikalt odjur") in the addressee of her letter dated with 20 July 1900 (Kleen's artist estate, 20 July 1900). Although Key does not elaborate on this nickname, it is probably intended as a playful yet pointed reference to Kleen's radical social and political views as a woman artist<sup>17</sup> and suffragette, including perhaps also her subversive

14 Her first visit took place on 27 November 1897, shortly followed by her first exhibition on 4 December 1897, where she displayed her recently made *Dreams (Drömmar)* illustrations. She also exhibited her art at "Nya Idun" in 1899, 1902, 1903, 1904, 1907; see Tyra Kleen's transcribed diaries.

15 Kleen was for instance dressed in a reform dress in 1904 and 1905: see Tyra Kleen's transcribed diaries.

16 She learned to ride a bicycle in Paris in 1896 and became an active bicyclist in 1897; see Tyra Kleen's transcribed diaries.

17 In the summer of 1900, Kleen travelled to Paris and London in search of collaborations with French and British publication houses. Key's nickname might also allude to these proactive efforts, which, however, remained largely unsuccessful (see Kleen, 1900).



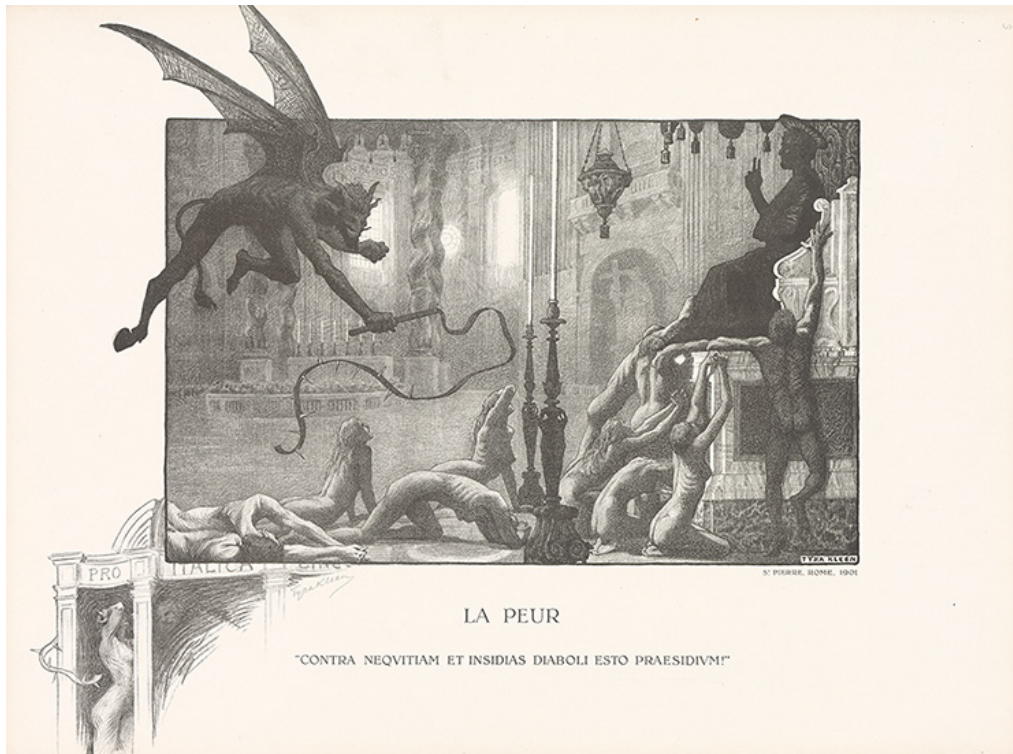


Figure 6. Tyra Kleen, *La Peur*, 1901, lithographic print, The National Library of Sweden, Stockholm. Image: The National Library of Sweden, license CC0.

self-staging as a man artist, a self-staging that her main character, Kleen's *alter ego* Sigrid Ulfklo, likewise enjoys in her debut novel *Play. From Rome's Bohemian World* (*Lek. Från Roms bohème-värld*) (1900).

### Isabel Cooper-Oakley, Ellen Key and Tyra Kleen's occult exploration around 1900

In September 1898, Kleen left Stockholm for Rome. Even though she returned to Sweden almost every year, Rome was her primary base until 1906. While continuing her work as an illustrator for Swedish publications, Kleen began producing lithographic prints in 1901 in Rome and soon achieved her breakthrough as a graphic artist, becoming widely exhibited and widely written about in Italy, and by 1908

even throughout Europe (Bruchmüller 2022, 321). In Rome in the early 1900s, Kleen also became involved within Theosophical circles, which her graphic output reflects in many ways. At the end of 1902 and the beginning of 1903, Kleen took part in Theosophical gatherings held by her new acquaintance, the English Theosophist Isabel Cooper-Oakley.<sup>18</sup> Born and raised in India, Cooper-Oakley (1854–1914) was a Theosophical author who, alongside her husband, belonged to the inner circle of Blavatsky and Olcott and, thus, two co-

18 The spelling of her name differs in the transcribed diaries, but it is more than likely that it is Cooper-Oakley Kleen engaged with.

founders of the Theosophical Society. She was an active member of the Theosophical Society, publishing a great number of Theosophical writings, giving lectures at for instance the Adyar headquarters in India in the 1880s and being of crucial importance for the inception of the Italian section of the Theosophical Society in 1902 in Rome (Theosophy Wiki 2025). Kleen probably had close contact with the Società Teosofica Italiana through Cooper-Oakley from its very beginning. According to her diary, she officially became a member of the Società Teosofica Italiana in January of 1904 and was deeply engaged with this society and their program throughout 1904 and 1905. In addition to attending lectures by for instance Cooper-Oakley or Annie Besant in 1904 and borrowing many books at the society's library, her diaries also testify to many discussions she held with fellow artists and upper-class companions about Theosophical questions during that time in Rome.<sup>19</sup>

Besides Kleen's diaries, which document her growing engagement with Theosophy in Rome in the early 1900s, Ellen Key's evolving interest in spirituality and Theosophy around 1900 also very probably had a strong influence on Kleen. Although the studied archival material contains limited explicit evidence of Key's and Kleen's exchange of occult ideas,<sup>20</sup>

Theosophy and broader spiritual currents were central to both their lives around 1900 and, very probably, also to their friendship. They were both critical towards dogmatic Christianity, which perhaps also is reflected in Kleen's lithographic print *La Peur* (1901) (fig. 6). This was closely tied to their suffragette identity; many suffragettes considered Theosophy—like the struggle for women's rights—as part of a broader emancipation movement directed against the establishment (Jansson 2023, 98). For many suffragettes, Theosophy was associated with a spiritual emancipation from dogmatic Christianity and its patriarchal structures, as was the case for Annie Besant. A similar approach to theosophy was probably also embraced by Key, who advocated Besant and her writing interpretation of Theosophy (Jansson 2023, 215). Even Kleen was familiar with Besant's writing (Steorn 2010, 178) and probably also sympathised with her social and feminist activist approach of Theosophy.

Although Key never identified as a Theosophist and was initially critical of Theosophical questions discussed in the Swedish press during the 1880s and

critical stance toward dogmatic Christianity and her exploration of alternative spiritual practices. In Kleen's letter dated 14 September 1904, she includes an ironic and humorous remark that I interpret as a critique of the lack of spiritual and religious freedom in Sweden. She claims that Swedish people only worship—and are only permitted to worship—local (Swedish) gods, whereas she prefers to worship the Sun God, who rarely appears in Sweden. See Ellen Key's Collection, 14 September 1904. By doing so, she breaks free from these constraints and marks herself as something of an odd bird. These examples are one of the few exchanges of spiritual content.

19 See for instance 1 February 1904 and 17 June 1905, Tyra Kleen's transcribed diaries.

20 After her sojourn to Sicily in 1901, Key wrote the following, among other things, to Kleen: "In Sicily I have learned to call upon *Santo diavlo!* And *he* shall embrace you if I find no grace in your cheeks and in your soul!" See Kleen's artist estate, 2 March 1901. Although probably intended humorously, the remark nonetheless reveals Key's

1890s, Key immersed herself in and became more receptive to Theosophical ideas around 1900.<sup>21</sup> Among these was especially the notion of “Eastern traditions”, which flourished within Europe around 1900, especially within the Indian section of the Theosophical Society, founded in 1891 and led by Besant from 1907 onwards (Jansson 2023, 292).<sup>22</sup> For Western free-thinkers like Key these “Eastern traditions” were associated with the unspoiled, the original and the feminine that had been lost within Western Christian patriarchy and included a Western interpretation of Buddhism (Jansson 2023, 293). Although sought as a means to go against Eurocentrism, this Western notion of “Eastern tradition” still made use of Western hegemonic structures. This interpretation of Buddhism carried out within Theosophy was also incorporated in Key’s own religious ideology, called *Life Faith (Lifstro)*, which she developed

- 21 Key’s attitude toward occultism in general, and Theosophy in particular, is complex. While it has been thoroughly examined in Hedda Jansson’s 2023 dissertation in religious studies, it remains largely unexplored elsewhere. It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a complete explanation of Key’s relation to Theosophy.
- 22 For further reading on discourses on Eastern spirituality and the vaguely defined Western conception of the “East” as a positive “Other”, particularly in relation to Asian religions closely aligned with the way I apply the term “Eastern traditions” as drawn from Jansson, see Kokkinen 2023.

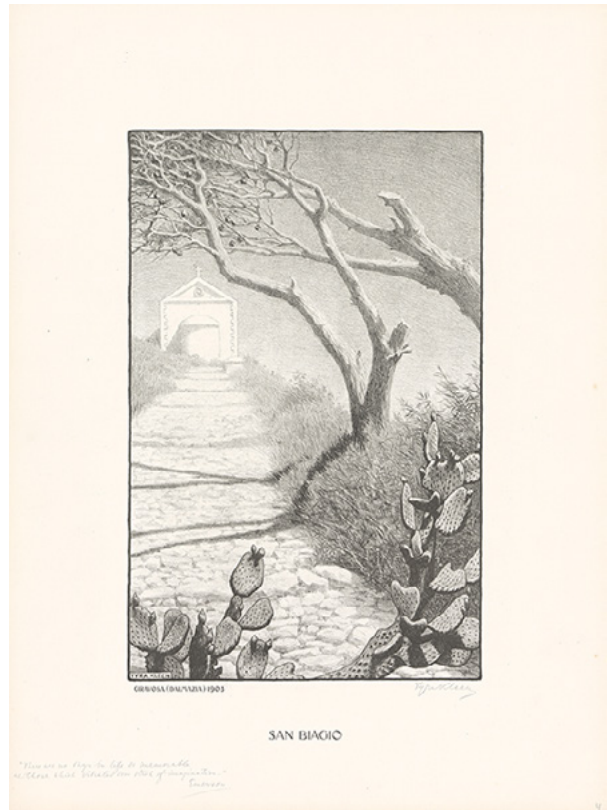


Figure 7. Tyra Kleen, *San Biagio*, 1903, lithographic print, The National Library of Sweden. Image: The National Library of Sweden, license CC0.

around 1900, as Jansson shows. Key’s ideology was informed by the Buddhist ideas about death, eternity, ethics and compassion—based upon the Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation, and stemmed from a monism, prevalent within Buddhism—which broke with the dualism of body and soul as well as worldly and spiritual for making Key’s point that the divine is within each human being’s existence (Jansson 2023, 297).

Some of Kleen’s works, along with parts of the correspondence between Kleen and Key, engage to some extent with these “Eastern traditions”. This makes it



Figure 8. Tyra Kleen, *Homo Sapiens*, 1903, lithographic print, The National Library of Sweden. Image: The National Library of Sweden, license CC0.

reasonable to assume that such ideas were significant not only to Key but also to Kleen's spiritual outlook, and that they may have mutually influenced one another. One possible sign of their similar approach is a quotation ADDED by Kleen to the lithographic print *San Biagio* (1903) (fig. 7) by Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>23</sup> The quotation addresses lasting and meaningful moments in life and, together with the image of a remotely placed Christian sacred place at the end of a dry and harsh Mediterranean pathway, highlights a deeper spiritual

insight within nature, as I argue. This can be related to the monism which Emerson, like Key, favoured, stressing that a universal spiritual essence flows through all beings and can be found everywhere. Kleen possibly also sympathised with this monism.

Moreover, Kleen's multi-media work *Homo Sapiens* (1903) (fig. 8) relates to ideas about "the savage" and the longing for the unspoiled and more primordial beyond Western civilisation, closely linked to the glorification of "Eastern traditions" within Theosophy around 1900. It conveys an ideal of the happy and "uncivilised" human being represented by a naked homosexual couple and their infants on a shoreline, surrounded by and in harmony with nature, as I argue. The quotation Kleen includes,

23 "There are no days in life so memorable, as those which vibrated [to] som[e] stroke of imagination." It is taken from Emerson's essay "The Poet", included in his *Essays: Second Series* (1844).



taken from the Belgian author Maurice Maeterlinck from his *La Sagesse et la destinée* (1898), enhances this expression. It presents happiness as something pure and original, yet essential to the soul, which is as pure and uncorrupted as “the savage”. Key was familiar with Kleen’s *Homo Sapiens*—as was the case with most of Kleen’s ongoing work, as her letters to Kleen show—and owned one version of this print, which she chose to place next to her bed, as she wrote to Kleen in February 1904 (Kleen’s artist estate, 6 February 1904).<sup>24</sup> As something that Key calls an illustration of “the ancient division of labour, the division I fight to preserve”, Key associated it with their feminist engagement and perhaps also with the longing for the unspoiled. Kleen discussed aspects such as civilisation and emancipation with Key (Ellen Key’s Collection, 14 September 1904), making it possible to relate this work to their interest in notions of the unspoiled related to critique of Western society.

Against this backdrop, Ellen Key and Isabel Cooper-Oakley seem to have played a central role in Kleen’s Theosophical exploration from 1902 onwards, which appear to have been closely aligned with the Indian section of the Theosophical Society and their ideas. Other figures who may have been important for her evolving occult interest include Mary Karadja—who became a spiritualist celebrity within Stockholm’s cultural networks around 1900 (see Falk 2024, 188–189)—and Anna Maria Roos, a Swedish

educator, Theosophist and author, with whom Key spent much time around 1900, though no explicit evidence of a shared engagement with the occult could be found within the studied archive material.<sup>25</sup>

By identifying 1902/03 as the beginning of Kleen’s active phase of occult exploration, this study disagrees slightly with earlier contributions by Ström Lehandler and Faxneld, who argue that Kleen already was well acquainted with esoteric ideas during the 1890s (Faxneld 2021, 68; Ström Lehandler 2018, 30; 2024, 34). While it is true that she encountered occult artistic circles in Paris as an art student and had already familiarised herself with Buddhism and Hinduism as an adolescent (Hermelin Gullstrand 2016, 20–21), her diaries offer no evidence of a deeper engagement or familiarity with the broader esoteric field prior to 1902. Her visits at the Symbolist occult Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris in 1897, discussed further below, should not be equated with her embrace of esoteric thoughts or practice. This might also be based on what I regard a misconception of Symbolism by Ström Lehandler and Faxneld, who understand Symbolism as inherently esoteric (Ström Lehandler 2024, 37–38; Faxneld 2023, 220). In contrast, this paper takes Symbolism as an umbrella term for a wide range of artistic expressions about making the tangible intangible, which do not necessarily need to be related to occult hidden knowledge and insights.

24 Thus, Kleen’s *Homo Sapiens* must have been central to Key and can be compared to the importance of Arnold Böcklin’s *Isle of the Dead* for Key, which she placed next to her bed after she moved to Ellen Key’s Strand in 1910 (see Jansson 2023, 266).

25 She attends for instance a lecture by Karadja in October of 1902 at the Grand Hotel in Stockholm: see Tyra Kleen’s transcribed diary 1902. Roos visited Kleen in Rome in May 1901: see Tyra Kleen’s transcribed diary 1901.

## Androgynous theory and Symbolist asymmetrical gender dynamics

Kleen's occult exploration also involved her engagement with occult literature from 1902 onwards, much of which she acquired during her sojourns in Rome and Paris between 1907 and 1912, as her diaries attest (Kleen, 1907–1912). Book titles, quotations or other direct indications of the specific content she engaged with are seldom recorded in the accessible archival material. However, one of the few pieces of evidence is a diary entry from the summer of 1902, in which she wrote “read the third sex” (Kleen, 26 July 1902). This expression probably refers to the androgynous ideal of the third gender as it is called within previous research, which was advocated in the comprehensive art theoretical and fictitious writing of the French author, art critic and occultist Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918). It was a relevant cornerstone of the art programme, informed by occult and Plato's writing, that Péladan developed, for the so-called Salons de la Rose+Croix. These salons were arranged by him in Paris between 1892 and 1897. They were influential multi-media spectacles, which referred to the original Rosicrucian order founded in seventeenth-century Germany (Greene 2017, 17, 39; Faxneld 2020, 43). Kleen visited the Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris in 1897 several times and was deeply fascinated by the art exhibited and the overall atmosphere.<sup>26</sup> In 1910, Kleen also read

other books by Péladan, namely the novel *Le Vice suprême* (1884) and his *La Pensée et les secrets* (which was impossible to identify) (Kleen, 4 June 1910; 18 June 1910; 19 June 1910; 9 September 1910), which she probably purchased during a recent Parisian sojourn the same year. *Le Vice suprême* deals with a society's moral degeneration, which can only be remedied through a return to tradition and origin, which the figure of the androgyne symbolised. Against the backdrop of this and Kleen's interest in occultism at that time, it can be assumed that it is Péladan's androgynous theory that she made herself familiar with in the early 1900s (see Bruchmüller 2022, 91–96).

This probably included her familiarity with the conception of the male Symbolist artist and his capability of attaining insights into higher hidden knowledge through a strong androgynous mental state, as Péladan proclaimed. This conception of male-defined spiritual transcendence drew on contemporary Theosophical thought and Plato's myth about the primordial androgyne, which epitomised paradisiac origin and cosmological powers and insights.<sup>27</sup> Only a male artist in other words was capable of becoming a Symbolist genius and attaining spiritual and creative transcendence. This male-connoted conception of the Symbolist genius, equated with

26 Written in response to a request from the Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, Kleen wrote the following text, which, however, was never published: “Péladan is a mediocre artist who would do almost anything to attract attention. He was no master. Yet for a young art student, the

other exhibiting artists—as well as the R+C salons themselves, with their astonishing conversations, music, art exhibitions, and ritualistic atmosphere—were deeply fascinating.” (Cederwall 1994, 28).

27 For more information on the conception of Péladan's male artist similar to a priest and Plato's primordial androgyne see Bruchmüller 2022, 84–90, 169181.

a priest or magician, was probably already something Kleen encountered when visiting the Salons de la Rose+Croix in 1897; only male artists were allowed to exhibit or as it was expressed in the manifesto of these salons: “Following Magical Law, no work by a woman will ever be exhibited or executed by the Order” (Péladan 1892, 12). This exclusion of women artists was something that Kleen strongly reacted to. After reading Péladan in 1910, she wrote an ironic and negative article on his Symbolist art programme about male-connoted spiritual transcendence, which was published on 24 September in the Swedish daily newspaper *Aftonbladet* with the title “Symbolism för Alla” (Kleen 1910, 7). She refers to Péladan as a charlatan and dismissed his quality of being a spiritual leader of his salons. The title of her article functioned as a paraphrase of Ellen Key’s *Beauty for All* (*Skönhet för Alla*) (1899), as I argue, with which Kleen pointed out the need to include women within Péladan’s salons and Symbolist theory. Kleen had already dismissed Péladan in 1897, regarding him as no master and calling him a “mediocre artist who would do almost anything to attract attention” (Cederwall 1994, 28).

Moreover, she also criticised the practice of being a spiritualist medium. Although she participated in spiritualist séances in Stockholm in 1909 and 1910, she actively avoided such participation later, as in 1912 (Kleen, 23 December 1909, 4 October 1910, 15 November 1912). Her critique is evident in a discussion included in her essay “Form” (1908), as noted by Faxneld. In the discussion Kleen dismissed mediumistic art for the passiveness of the creative self, which receives external influences from spirits and, therefore, functions as a mere

instrument (Faxneld 2021, 70; Faxneld 2023, 226). In this way, she distances herself from the artistic practice which her female companions Mary Karadja, Hilma af Klint or Lucie Lagerbielke adapted around 1900. The practice of spiritualist mediumship attracted many women, as it enabled them to make their voices heard in public, although Swedish female spiritualists were not necessarily suffragettes (Falk 2024, 71).

Kleen very probably preferred and chose to keep control as the creator over her artistic output. Hence, her subject-orientated creative approach corresponds with H. P. Blavatsky’s view on the adept and his control, which she put forward in her *Isis Unveiled* (1877) as one of the cornerstones of Theosophical views (Faxneld 2021, 70; Faxneld 2023, 225).

In this way, Kleen was able to pursue an approach to spirituality and creativity that both accorded with and subverted Symbolist conceptions of the male artist genius. She exemplified the notion of the Symbolist woman artist and very probably also the notion of female spiritual transcendence. In this sense, she appropriated and undermined the asymmetrical gender rules within Symbolism. Her artistic output can be regarded as a bold manifestation of female Symbolist creativity. She may have gone even further by suggesting that women artists were, in fact, better suited to access higher spiritual truth.

In Rome in 1904, Kleen gifted one newly printed copy of her lithograph *Sed non Satiati* (1902) (fig. 9) to her friend and fellow Theosophist Isabel Cooper-Oakley (Kleen, 4 June 1904). Like some copies from the first edition in 1902, Cooper-Oakley’s version was embellished with



Figure 9. Tyra Kleen, *Sed Non Satiati*, 1902, lithographic print, The National Library of Sweden. Image: The National Library of Sweden, license CC0.

watercolour, hand-applied by Kleen after the printing process. This image depicts a passionate kiss and embrace between a naked man and a naked woman, lying on a rooftop's outdoor floor between a reflective water mirror and a red sun—either rising or setting right behind them, which, to my knowledge, was the only detail coloured by Kleen. Produced during the time she read about the third gender in 1902, this work was probably influenced by the occult idea of attaining a powerful androgynous state through a physical and spiritual heterosexual union and a perfect genderless spiritual state through love (Bruchmüller 2022, 253–263). This is not only enhanced within the image itself, but also with the title Kleen chose as referring to but also modifying Charles Baudelaire's poem *Sed non Satiata* (“She is not satisfied”), included in

*Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) to *Sed non Satiati*, meaning “They are not satisfied”. In this way, the title highlights a mutually equal sexual desire which is displayed in the heterosexual intimate scene instead of the condemnation of an inappropriate female desire, which is expressed in Baudelaire's poem, that Kleen's work draws on. A similar idea about an intimate heterosexual encounter might be conveyed in Kleen's *La Chevelure* (1905), which draws on Baudelaire's poem with the same title, and in her aforementioned *Homo Sapiens* (1903).

Another work which can be linked to the concept of the third gender that Kleen engaged with in the early 1900s is her *Écho et Narcisse* (1903), with Narcissus' embodiment of the third gender through his sexual self-sufficiency as a form of asexuality (Bruchmüller 2022, 234).



**Artist/author, journalist, suffragette, occultist, pacifist—Tyra Kleen's diverse emancipatory roles between 1907 and 1915**

After her long sojourn in Rome and her breakthrough as a graphic artist in Italy, Kleen made Stockholm her base in 1907. At that time, she exhibited widely throughout Europe with, for instance, women artists' associations in Rome and in Stockholm<sup>28</sup> and at numerous group and solo exhibitions in cities such as Paris, London and Berlin. Furthermore, she began working as a journalist for journals closely affiliated with the Swedish women's rights movement, contributed art reviews to newspapers and published her essay "Form" in 1908 on aesthetic questions to home interiors etc. at a time when she moved into a villa in Lidingö Brevik outside of Stockholm, which she gradually transformed into an artist's home.

From 1907 to 1909, Kleen contributed to the journals *Mitt Hem*, *Illustrerad tidskrift för hem och hushåll*, where she also was a co-editor, and *Dagny: Tidningen för*

*Svenska Kvinnorörelse*, as her diaries attest (Kleen, 1909). Her contributions included not only articles and essays on women's issue, but also her own drawings, fictional short stories and reviews of art and literature such as an occult novel titled *Dreams: A Curious Story* (*Drömmen. En sällsam berättelse*), published anonymously, but written by Anna Maria Roos and Lucie Lagerbielke (Kleen 1908, 653–654). Although she reported on the International Suffragette Meeting in London in June 1908 (Kleen 1908) as a correspondent, most of her contributions rather highlighted women's achievements within the cultural sector. Hence, her journalistic work reflected her multi-faceted roles and interests as an artist, author, women's rights activist and occultist. Her first article with the title "Male and female points of views", published in *Mitt Hem* on 11 November 1907, directs sharp criticism at men and their views on women. Rather than continuing to be objectified, belittled, reduced or judged by men and society as illogical or deviant from the male norm, or as being either too sexual or not sexual enough, she urges women to break free from self-sacrifice and submission to men. She calls for a strong-willed and rational woman.

Kleen returned to addressing the need of women's emancipation from patriarchy but also from civilisation and society's luxury in 1916 in an interview with the American journal *The Evening World* during her first visit to the United States (Greeley-Smith 1916, 3). While comparing European women with American women, she contrasted the so-called "orchid woman", who for Kleen was an emblem of men's and society's projection of the ideal woman, with the "emancipated woman".

28 Kleen co-founded the Rome-based *Società delle Artiste* in 1905, together with Italian and other expatriate women artists, and exhibited with the association in 1906 (see Castrenzi 2022, 14; Iorino 2019). From 1910 to 1913, Kleen also served as a board member of the *Föreningen Svenska Konstnärinnor* (*The Association of Swedish Women Artists*), founded in 1910, and exhibited with the group in Stockholm in 1911 (see *Föreningen Svenska konstnärinnor* 1911, 24). However, several diary entries suggest a rather disengaged attitude toward the association. For instance, an entry from October 1910, attesting that she chose to attend an evening gathering with spiritual ladies at Mrs. Sillen to attending the association's board meeting (Kleen, 12 October 1910). This is probably why she also resigned from the board in early 1913 (Kleen, 29 January 1913).



Figure 10. Tyra Kleen, *Orchids*, 1907, lithographic print, The National Library of Sweden. Image: The National Library of Sweden, license CC0.

Whereas the “orchid woman” was widespread in Europe, there were few emancipated women in Europe, such as Ellen Key, whom Kleen mentioned as an example, concluding further that feminism in Europe had not progressed as far as in the United States. According to Kleen, it is the first-mentioned type of woman, who is visualised in Kleen’s lithographic print *Orchids* (1907) (fig. 10), as she further explained, whose inability at emancipation is a product of civilisation and luxury, which made her unnatural, unreal and sick. Thus, the three dancing women in her graphic work *Orchids*, dressed in orchid-like Oriental costumes and adorned with three orchids hovering above them, are to be read as artificial and superficial, dependent on men’s gazes.

The work of art is dominated by a decorative ornamental surface, similar to a dense frieze, created by the women’s bent bodies and flowing scarves, tossed around in the air like billowing curves. The surface-dominated style and content are linked together here to symbolise a woman, caused by society, who needs to be overcome, according to Kleen.<sup>29</sup>

Kleen made a similar comparison between Swedish and Italian women in a

29 Apart from my contribution from 2020, this has rarely been addressed within previous research (Bruchmüller 2020, 163). Instead, the undulating curving lines have been interpreted as sign for something invisible and esoteric by Faxneld in 2021 and Ström Leander in 2023.

letter to her companion Ellen Key from September 1904. In it, she described Italian women as still far from emancipation, characterising them as existing in a pre-moral and pre-human state, and in need of Key's guidance. In contrast, she praised Swedes (and, thus, also Swedish women) for being highly educated and progressive, referring to the new generation as Key's creation (Ellen Key's Collection, 14 September 1904). Although her conclusions altered over time, Kleen's varied expression on women's emancipation, including her *Homo Sapiens* (1903), reflects a critique of Western luxury, society and civilisation, possibly influenced by her Theosophical worldview and its emphasis on "Eastern traditions", as mentioned above. At the end of 1910, Kleen undertook a three-month journey to Ceylon and India, during which she visited, among other places, Adyar, the headquarter of the Theosophical Society's Indian section (Ström Leander 2024, 46–50). During this journey, she probably deepened her exploration of "Eastern traditions" oscillating within Theosophy.<sup>30</sup> Her use of terms such as "civilisation" in 1916 needs to be seen against the backdrop of this journey.

In addition to her journalistic work, Kleen also participated in official women's suffrage meetings, such as in 1909 and in 1911 at the Women's Suffrage Congress (with Kristliga Föreningen av Unga Kvinnor

KFUK), where she took part in negotiations and exhibited, as her diary attests (Kleen, 29 May–17 June 1911). She also became a member of the Svenska Hem (Swedish Home) in 1909, a cooperative food society managed by women for women, which had many suffragettes among its members. In the summer of 1909, she engaged—for the first time, according to her diary—with The Swedish Peace Association in Stockholm (Kleen 1909). This was most probably connected to her correspondence with the German world-peace activist Anna Eckstein, about whom she also wrote an article at that time (although a published article by Kleen about Ekstein has not been identified). As participants of the Nordic Peace Congress in August the following year, like Ellen Key, Kleen also functioned as Eckstein's host and translator. During the First World War, Kleen's stance as a pacifist was further strengthened. In 1915, she participated in The Women's Peace Committee and in Women's Peace Sunday, and also expressed her view in the aforementioned article from 1916, where the interviewer referred to her as a "militant pacifist". According to Kleen, the peace movement was an integral part of the women's suffrage movement (Greeley-Smith 1916, 3).

## Conclusions

This study has shown that Tyra Kleen's life around 1900 was dominated by a complex coexistence of her roles as a suffragette, artist/author and Theosophist, which mutually enriched each other.

As recent research has pointed out, there were close connections between the first feminist wave and the flourishing of spirituality at the turn of the twentieth century in many countries, which is a dynamic

30 See Tyra Kleen's transcribed diary 1911 and her travelogue *Journeys in the India (Strövtåg i Orienten)* (Kleen 1911). However, a critical reading of her travelogue as a source is necessary, since it probably presents a staged narrative, potentially dramatising and distorting aspects of her journey, perhaps also blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction.

conflation that is still relatively unexplored. As for instance Joy Dixon or Hedda Jansson show, women's identity and engagement with occult movements such as Theosophy often functioned around 1900 in countries such as England or Sweden as the spiritual dimension of a larger emancipative project, to which the suffragette movement also belonged (Jansson 2023, 100; Dixon 2011, 232–233). Hence, as a conflation of the spiritual, political and social, Theosophy and the suffragette movement were closely linked together with the overall aim of going against the establishment and more particularly against the patriarchy, dogmatic Christianity and sometimes also Western hegemony. The particular role of occultism within feminist political culture has neither been sufficiently acknowledged nor thoroughly explored. As Dixon shows, suffragettes' spiritual identity was often a crucial component of their feminist politics, and women's activity as spiritualists or Theosophists provided them with access to the public sphere during the English Edwardian era (Dixon 2001, 4). This also goes hand in hand with Kraft's contribution from 2013 on the Theosophical Society and the way it contributed to the type of the "New Woman" (Kraft 2013, 356–371). It is against this backdrop that Tyra Kleen's diverse but interlinked roles as an artist/author, suffragette and Theosophist must be understood. Other features, such as Kleen's increasing pacifist standpoint from 1909 and throughout the First World War as well as her choice of temporarily becoming a vegetarian in the early 1900s can also be related to a social dimension of Theosophy and the overall aim of going against the establishment (see Jonsson 2022, 98–100).

As a Swedish noblewoman with a Christian upbringing and identity, Kleen's activism as a suffragette already emerged in her youth during her international apprenticeship as a woman artist. When she established herself as a Swedish illustrator and author as well as an international graphic artist in the early 1900s, Kleen presented, through her artist identity and creative output, a feminist critical perspective. As a Symbolist woman artist, she boldly inserted herself within and subverted Symbolist male-connoted gender dynamics. From around 1902 onwards her active exploration of Theosophy, I argue, contributed to this feminist creative intervention, in which her mutual exchange with her companion Ellen Key played a crucial role. Like Key and other key figures such as Isabel Cooper-Oakley, Kleen probably first and foremost sympathised with the Indian section of the Theosophical Society in general and Annie Besant's social and feminist approach of Theosophy in particular. Hence, Kleen was loosely aligned with the section of the Theosophical Society that was less popular in Sweden compared to the American section, led by Katherine Tingley, which received significantly more members, and operated under the name *Universella Broderskapet* (Jansson 2023, 223).

In the light of Kleen's progressive and subversive feminist activist identity in the early 1900s and her mutual exchange with Key, it may even be suggested that Kleen considered women as particularly well suited—more so than men—to spiritual exploration, closely tied to occultism. At least Ellen Key believed in women's propensity for emotional, intuitive and spiritual knowledge (Jansson 2023, 286). ■



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