

Tales of Closet and Canon in Finlandia Prize-Winning Literature and Its Reception

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*I am no woman. I am a neuter.
I am a child, a page and a bold resolve,
--
I am a toast to the glory of all women,
I am a step towards hazard and ruin,
I am a leap into freedom and self...*

This is how Edith Södergran writes in her poem *Vierge moderne* in 1916 (Södergran 1984). About a hundred years later, in popular music, a Finnish girl duo PMMP sings how "When we were kids Barbies were stripped / and we got married in the attic" and how "in daytime I pretend to be normal".

In the chorus PMMP's Paula and Mira sing:

*You always stay with me
oh Nina
No, you never leave me
my misery
-- you just stay with me, oh Nina
-- and you never leave me, Paulina*

The song ends with the lyrics "You always stay with me, oh Nora / -- and you never leave me, Aurora." (Vesala 2003, transl. SK.)

In her new radio hit, a young female singer Jenni Vartiainen sings how "the streets are filled with people" and "they don't know anything about us"; and how "You are beautiful / in your high heels". In the chorus "We walk together hand in hand / in front of people". The chorus continues:

*Don't you care about the looks of other people
because we are together*

*They don't know anything, they are not part of this tale
which is read only by a few (Brunila 2007, transl. SK.)*

My doctoral dissertation deals with this tale which is performed in Jenni Vartiainen's song, and which seems to repeat itself for centuries but which, if adopting the lyrics of the song, are "read only by a few". They are tales of gender and sexuality in question, as they cross borders of normativity: when a woman is "no woman" but "a neuter", or "a child, a page and a bold resolve", and when girls called Paula and Mira sing about their desire for Nina, Paulina, Nora and Aurora.

What kind of meanings does it make that these tales are read – despite their extreme popularity today – still many times only by a few? By this metaphor 'only by few' I am

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referring to another common and even fashionable cultural metaphor, the closet, and another metaphor adapted from the first; the *rhetoric of the closet*. By the idea of the rhetoric of the closet I mean the lingual and narrative reciprocity and even power games with which non-normative sexualities, for example homosexuality, lesbianism and bisexuality, are discussed in culture (see also Hekanaho 2006, 21–24). Sexuality that is not pairing heterosexuality even today tends to be brought into the public sphere only with discreet insinuations and allusiveness, and many times it stays hidden between the lines.

Quite many of the textual and narrative hints and allusions have, especially in history, signified sexual otherness only to a few. Same-sex desire has been signaled with ambiguous and symbolic language, and this is how people who have felt the same way have been able to send and receive hidden messages about their existence and desire without publicly coming out in mainstream culture. There have been obvious reasons for this reciprocity of hiding and revealing. Homosexuality was a crime in Finland until 1971 (Stålström 1997, 225; Sorainen 2005, 3, 50). The clause that prohibited exhortation to same-sex intercourse was overruled as late as 1999. Until then, an 18-year-old person, for example, committed a more criminal act by having an intimate relationship with a person of his own sex who is a year younger than he, than by violently abusing and mutilating the same person (Mustonen 2007; Rautiainen 2007). The rhetoric of the closet and the so called closet speech that hides and only suggests same-sex sexual de-

sire have, indeed, been the only ways to publicly express same-sex desire.

The situation has naturally changed in contemporary culture. The media constantly thrusts tales of homosexuality and currently even lesbianism and to some extent also bi and trans: Not only the music business, to which I referred in the beginning, but also advertising makes use of gender and sexual ambivalence in their marketing processes. Films handle problematic and social complexities that sexual subjects, other than heterosexual, meet daily in culture which is heteronormative. The politically correct ‘compulsory’ African American characters represented in American television series are not sufficient any more, but the series in their sexual political correctness currently offer representations also of compulsory gay guys. In addition, performances and double strategies such as drag, camp, and the above-mentioned rhetoric of the closet practiced by queers have been appropriated by dominant culture. Currently one can put into the closet and take out from there most interesting and multiple things which have nothing to do with sexuality any more (see e.g. Kirstinä 2007, 10).

Additionally, the rhetoric of the closet seems to have been adopted as a lingual and even rhetoric effective resource in cases in which non-normative sexualities are written in a context in which it might, no matter how fashionable queerness is nowadays, be seen as dubious and questionable. In these cases the message is understood, ‘read’, by



some people, 'only -- a few', while some people do not get the message. This is how the hidden, other kind of, tales of sexuality, which hardly open the door of the closet, are not told to everyone. Or, even though they are told, some people do not hear them. Thus the rhetoric of the closet is a very powerful resource: the message reaches the ones who can interpret the rhetoric of the closet but spares the ones who do not want to know about issues that appear dubious and questionable to them.

Queer political reading

How does all this described above appear in contemporary Finnish literature and culture and, in particular, in the objects of my research, Johanna Sinisalo's, Pirkko Saisio's and Helena Sinervo's novels *Ennen päivänlaskua ei voi* (2000, *Not Before Sundown* 2003), *Punainen erokirja* (2003, *Red Book of Difference/Separation*) and *Runoilijan talossa* (2004, *In the House of a Poet*) which have all received the Finlandia Prize for fiction; the most recognized and most prestigious literary award in Finland? The novels of Sinisalo, Saisio and Sinervo discussing non-normative sexualities – novels in which sexuality is presented as not only something between a man and a woman, as heterosexuality the goal of which is a relationship – are analysed in the context of contemporary cultural change, in which queer themes have become not only a visible part of cultural representations of gender and sexuality but also active constituents of the established cultural canon. The study considers the varieties of gendered and sexual meanings,

which are generated by this fiction and – as the novels in question deal with non-normative sexuality – it also discusses how these issues were manifested in their reception. Furthermore, it investigates the problematics of a literary genre which thematizes non-normative sexuality.

The publication of these novels seems at first glance a suitable answer to the need of culture to create new, queer performances or queer stories dealing with broad-mindedness, advanced ideas, tolerance and politically correct conduct. However, they also have queer political goals, by which the authors try to question, oppose and confuse the heterosexual order in culture. The novels under investigation participate in the cultural, societal, social and discursive processes that use gender and sexuality to construct meanings. The fact that they have also received the Finlandia Prize connects them to a wider context, in contemporary culture and society, which place sexuality at its centre. Whereas wide and far-reaching gender issues, brought about by cultural, intellectual, judicial and political changes, marked the turn of the 20th century (Rojola 1999, 155–164; Kirstinä 2000, 136–140; Melkas 2006, 14–17), the turn of the present century is more explicitly sexual in character, facilitated by contemporary phenomena – such as the epochal changes in theories of gender and sexuality, or legislation and presentations of sexual culture, which have manifested themselves over recent years.

What kind of queer political aims do Sinisalo's, Saisio's and Sinervo's novels subsequently have and how are those



aims accomplished? The works clearly show that fiction has excellent possibilities to represent genders, sexualities, desire and stories about them in a different way, and thus produce different knowledge about them. I have searched and found different kind of data produced by the novels in my work using *queer political reading* as a method. Through queer political reading the novels proved to be, on the one hand, tales in which barriers are broken and constructions of gender and sexuality are questioned by presenting or reproducing genders and sexualities in another way and, on the other hand, as texts which make good use of the way in which the rhetoric of the closet tends to hide and veil the queer it manifests or represents.

Furthermore, queer political reading led me to examine how literature dealing with queer and representing genders and sexualities in a different way, is read in our present culture and its institutions, to be more exact, in the book reviews conveyed by contemporary media. At that point, the rhetoric of the closet formed as the object of my study even more clearly than before. It started to look as if the rhetoric of the closet is not even sufficient as a concept to describe the processes of reading with which literature dealing with non-normative sexuality is publicly dealt with. As I studied the public readings on Helena Sinervo's novel *Runoilijan talossa*, I found out that they were in parts even heteronormative if not closeting: They did not even once mention that the principal character has intimate relationships with both men and women. In the context of postmodern culture and postmodern media's 'queer turn', which I already described above, this is an obvious

paradox: How can media culture which is said to be bubbling over with entertaining homosexual, lesbian, bi- and trans-performances and in which, for the sake of sexual politically correct conduct, performances of quota homosexuals, for instance, are favoured, still keep the bisexual and queer qualities of the novel as its public secret?

The reception of the novel *Runoilijan talossa* verifies the observations already made before, according to which homosexuality stands out in the fictive performances and texts of the media and culture more than ever, but as far as actual, real flesh and blood authors or those already deceased are concerned, the social and national closet of queer is still maintained (Juvonen 2004; Kangasvuo 2005). The protagonist in the novel *Runoilijan talossa* is called Eeva-Liisa Manner, which refers to the Finnish canonized modernist poet, translator and playwright Eeva-Liisa Manner (1921–1995). The life of Eeva-Liisa in the novel follows rather well the life of real Eeva-Liisa Manner, and so the work has been called a biographical novel.

The novel *Runoilijan talossa* gave rise to a lively debate when it was published, when Helena Sinervo was nominated as a candidate for the Finlandia Prize, and in the context of the prize-giving ceremony. In its reception, one of the central themes was sexuality that breaks heterosexual norms and barriers, but in the texts dealing with the work, however, it was still seldom openly discussed. In public debates, having queer qualities is still in many contexts not spoken of aloud but hinted at and with most peculiar but often very traditional, closet rhetoric turns



of phrases. The reception of the work *Runoilijan talossa* manifests several interesting conventions of presentation, representation and rhetoric of the closet, when the relation of the canon to attitudes against norms and to *queer* is described. It seems that queering the historic, already deceased representative of the canon of literature, Eeva-Liisa Manner, is not permitted even in fiction. In the same way, a new possibility of expressing queer brought spontaneously out, also by Helena Sinervo an author canonized with the national literature prize Finlandia – her public message that a biography is narration on its author, too, (i.e. in this case on Sinervo herself) – is not dealt with at all in the reception. If we, consequently, can say that queer has managed to slip from closet to canon for a moment in the field of 21st century Finnish literature, in the reception of the novel *Runoilijan talossa* even the mere possibility of queer being connected either with Eeva-Liisa Manner, canonized earlier in the history of literature, or with Helena Sinervo, canonized in 2004, was as a rule shut out of the canon back into the closet.

From Closet to Canon?

From the perspective of a queer or feminist scholar the queering of the Finlandia Prize institution connected to Sinisalo's, Saisio's and Sinervo's novels is one element of a social change, in which the meanings of genders and sexualities are debated. In addition to Sinisalo, Saisio (nominations also in 2005 [*Voimattomuus*, Powerlessness], 2000 [*Vastavalo*, Against the Light] and 1998 [*Pie-*

nin yhteinen jaettava, The Smallest Shared Dividend]) and Sinervo such awarded and nominated authors, who have also written about queer issues, as Christer Kihlman (nominations in 1987 and 1986 [*Gerdt Bladhs undergång*, Fall of Gerdt Blahd; *På drift i förlustens landskap*, Adrift in the Landscape of Defeat]), Mirkka Rekola (nomination in 1987 [*Tuoreessa muistissa kevät*, Remembering Spring]), Eva Wein (nomination in 1992 [*Kulkue*, Procession]) and Pentti Holappa (nominations in 1992 and 1987 [*Sormenjälkiä tyhjässä*, Fingerprints in Emptiness and *Savun hajua*, Smell of Smoke]; the Finlandia Prize in 1998 [*Ystävän muotokuva*, Portrait of a Friend]), prove that queer is present in our literary culture and entire society. The novels tell us about the dynamics and decline of traditional and standardized Finnish culture: it is not as monolithic in places as it might seem. In this way, besides the meanings of different representations of the genders and sexualities, themes such as the nation and nationality are also discussed in the novels. Along with them, the stable belief of our nation in the historical function and duty of the Finnish novel depicting, developing and sophisticating Finnishness appears quite interesting (see Kirstinä 2007, 11–12).

The Finlandia Prize is a commercial literature prize, which is why rewarding works with queer themes is not surprising. Generally, queer does represent an excellent way of selling products in postmodern culture. The queer nature of the prize is, however, a manifestation of something more: The candidates for the prize are nominated by a different jury every year, and the winner is chosen by



a different person every year. And still queer makes itself seen and felt.

How well queer is really seen and felt is of particular interest. In a society characterized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and saturated with the epistemology of the closet and the rhetoric of the closet, interesting tension is created by the fact that queer is, on the one hand, quite present and on the surface in the representations of sexuality but, at the same time, hidden. What is remarkable is how and by which means, on what terms and at what price queer is visible in culture. It seems that in our nationally canonized literature and, with that, in all our cultural identity and ethos, despite the latent queer quality, queer themes are visible at an institutional level only when it is appropriate to the time and place (c.f. Halberstam 2005). At times writers can swiftly move from the closet to being canonized, but the return from the canon back to the closet, also, takes place without much difficulty.

Nevertheless, we must not forget that even though at times efforts are made in the reception and in the sphere of literature as a whole to push back to the closet the potential queer nature of both Finlandia literature prize winners accepted from the closet to the canon in Finnish literature and their potentially queer works, the efforts are not completely successful. Othering of culture, society and nation anyhow slips out here and there from the closet, which I have wanted to prove with my queer political reading, and there is nothing that the guardians of public morals sitting on the symbolic closet of the nation can do about it.

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