

# On Publishing Queer Topics in Finland

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## Literature as history

On Friday, the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2014, the former Finnish parliament approved same-sex marriage. Thousands of supporters of marriage equality had gathered around the Parliament, while opponents of the measure found themselves vastly outnumbered. It was a historical day of equal rights in Finland.

In May 2015, also the Irish people approved equal marriage. Before the referendum in Ireland, the author Colm Tóibín was among the many activists who spoke for this change in law. In his speech at Trinity College, Tóibín especially emphasised the importance of literature for society and the way it deals with its minorities. It is not only the legal status that generates change within the minds of people. Literature has long been equally important for the visibility of queer people. By going through examples of gay literary history, he named the difficulties that authors like Thomas Mann, Oscar Wilde, E.M. Forster or Kate O'Brien had faced during their lifetime.

But he also demonstrated that certain challenges have prevailed: "Straight critics, including ones who mean no harm, have tended to write about gay authors as though they were straight, or as though it did not matter." [...] According to Tóibín, this resulted in the fact that "as gay people, we

grow up alone; there is no history. [...] It is as though, in Adrienne Rich's phrase, if you were gay, 'you looked into the mirror and saw nothing'. Thus the discovery of a history and a tradition and a sense of heritage must be done by each individual [...] (Tóibín, 14.5.2015)."

In naming the lack of an understanding and an awareness of a history of queerness that prevails still today, Tóibín made an essential point. In order to understand the character and significance of an event like approving equal marriage, one needs to know the history of a minority, that has long remained in the shadows of society and history writing in Finland as well.

And what could be more useful for making such a history visible than literature? Literature is essential in providing role models that might be lacking in everyday life. It also mirrors society, since it never arises in a vacuum, but develops within its surroundings. Queer topics, with which I mean anything that is beyond what is perceived as "normal" and that questions heteronormative standards and values, have long been difficult to tackle in literature in any Western country. Finland was, however, one of the comparatively few countries that had banned both male and female homosexual deeds from 1889 until 1971.

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## Females at odds with normativity

In my dissertation, I have focused on norms and values regarding sexuality and gender and how these were conveyed by literature in the 1920s and 30s. I have also explored in which ways and to which degree literature was an object of sexual-political control. Since prevailing nationalist-patriotic ideas had a deep impact on the confirmation of heteronormative ideas about femininity, especially concerning motherhood, I have analysed those queer topics that focus on “the representation of female identities at odds with heterosexual norms”, as Rachel Carroll (2012, 1; 11) has phrased it. I have also asked which roles were ascribed to women and what expectations society and the literary field – authors, critics and publishers – had.

The works I have analysed are central works of literature published in Finnish or Swedish that focus on female literary characters and contain queer topics. Moreover, the authors were then, or are today, established ones: Ain’Elisabet Pennanen, Elsa Soini, Mika Waltari, Rosamond Lehmann, Alma Söderhjelm, Hagar Olsson, Helvi Hämäläinen, Margareta Suber, Radclyffe Hall and Émile Zola.

While queer literary studies have increased in Finland in the last years, there still are many gaps. My interest in power structures in society, literature and publishing had led me to the insight that there has been no larger study of Finnish literature with queer content that was written before the 1960s. There has also been no research on the analysis of Finnish publishing policies from a queer perspective so far. And neither is there a study that would compare Finnish and Finland-Swedish publishing from this angle.

My aim was to show the connections between different fields and discourses of society and their effects on queer topics in literature in Finland, both in Finnish and in Swedish. By means of a critical discourse analysis and following the ideas of Michel Foucault, I have examined how

social power and dominance interacted within the literary field and what effects different power practises had on the literary production in terms of queer topics.

## Whose silences?

The works I have selected for my analysis are then different examples of the following questions: what topics could be published in Finland? Whose voices have remained visible in literary history? And whose voices have been silenced?

The question of silencing is therefore a central one in my thesis. Silenced voices tell as much as canonised literature about the society behind the books, its expectations in terms of literature, and its norms and values. The question why certain voices are silenced can lead to different answers. Firstly, the pertinence principle as Pierre Bourdieu has coined it, is essential: which books and topics are seen as relevant to be published, and which are not? The relevance of topics is very much bound to the interest of those who decide and also tells about their values. Thus, silence is always closely connected to power.

Secondly, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has shown, homosexuality usually appears as a secret and silence in literature. This is the reason why sexual otherness has formed the “closet”, the unarticulated area of knowing and not-knowing. This way of dealing with queerness was also typical of Finnish literature and publishing in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: it was an ongoing game of indications and negations, both in literary texts, reviews and archival material.

Thirdly, silencing can also mean censorship by publishers, as the second translation of Émile Zola’s novel *Nana* from 1952 demonstrates: it lacks

all the references to the protagonist's intimate relationship to her female friend. A significant mixture of publisher's censorship and self-censorship is Helvi Hämäläinen's novel *Kaunis sielu*.

## The literary war of the 1930s

Literature played an important role within the building of the Finnish national identity. Both earlier studies and archival material have shown that the bigger publishers as well as most influential reviewers were in general aligned with the nationalist-oriented elite and influenced by the ideas of the Lutheran Church. A superficial look at published works might therefore suggest that publishing in Finland during this time followed the tight values concerning female decency and the demand of motherhood.

Yet, several literary works provide evidence that the literary field also followed its very own rules. Queer topics were addressed either deliberately or they leaked into texts. In addition, there were major differences between the Finnish and the Finland-Swedish literary field, and between the values that prevailed within the literary elites.

In order to identify examples of queer topics in texts that, on the surface, not necessarily would indicate queerness to the common reader but which conceal or cloak queerness, I have based my study on the method of a queer reading. It analyses the heteronormativities which a literary text communicates, as well as its possibilities of questioning and undermining them. It can be used for both texts that openly question heteronormative standards and for texts that are strongly loaded with heteronormativity. For example, Elsa Soini plays with gender roles in the novel *Jumalten ja ihmisten suosikit*, while in her novel *Uni* she subtly introduces critical voices that undermine set values and which present alternatives to heteronormative standards.

Mika Waltari's works *Suuri illusioni* and *Yksinäisen miehen juna* are again examples of heteronormative values that confirmed prevailing ideals of society at the end of the 1920s. Waltari was also active in the discussions about morals at the beginning of the 1930s and especially argued against influences from new foreign literature that was in his opinion poisonous and indecent. The discussions about either the need of translations or their bad influence on the people were central during that time and are reflected in a decreasing number of translations at the beginning of the 1930s. These discussions, led by representatives of the Church and the cultural elite resulted in the so-called literary war in the mid-1930s which was about a belief in progress, also in moral terms, and the idea of a crisis of progress.

## Questioning normativities

The 1920s and 30s in Finland thus were a time of changes and debates on principles that had their focus on literature, but also spread to other fields of society due to literature's central role in the nation-building process. The time was characterised by discussions about decency and gender roles, especially concerning women who had gained and demanded more freedom, both in society and in the literary field.

The Finland-Swedish literary field was less involved in these discussions. At the beginning of the century, it had already been influenced by European modernists and it formed its own, rather independent field. For example works by Alma Söderhjelm and Hagar Olsson demonstrate that openly queer topics were more likely to be published in Finland-Swedish than in Finnish. Yet, the Finland-Swedish critics did not necessarily appreciate the openness and social criticism of especially Söderhjelm. Misogyny and/or silence within reviews had been characteristic of both Finnish and Finland-Swedish critics. The power relations in the literary fields

differed, too. While, generally speaking, the Finland-Swedish publishers and authors – despite the law – were rather open to address queer topics, the Finnish publishers were more reluctant to do so.

Moreover, my dissertation shows that works that undermined heteronormative values succeeded to do so mostly by using the concept of the “New Woman”, which means an unmarried female character independently living in cities. Or they used the concept of “social motherhood”, which means motherhood that can be fulfilled in social professions. Also the use of different genres was significant in approaching queer topics: it is mostly light fiction where a positive attitude towards and a constructive discussion of queer topics can be found.

The classic triangle love story that usually includes two male characters and one female can be observed as an essential element in almost all those works as well. It is subverted by an either all female triangle, or a triangle between two female characters and one male one. Furthermore, a difference between publishers can be noticed, which can be traced back to the original ideas behind their foundations: Otava, Karisto and the Finland-Swedish publishers Schildts and Söderström were most likely to publish works with queer content.

My analysis of the publishing and reception of queer topics consequently demonstrates that despite the dominant nationalist and conservative discourses prevailing in the Finnish literary field in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also literature that defied the normative expectations in terms of gender roles and sexuality could be published. But the examples of my study have also clarified the limits of publishing and writing in enabling queer topics. While a direct, positive utterance of queer topics was rarely possible to be published in Finnish, the probability of resisting set norms was greater when hidden between the lines and can also clearly be observed within the Finland-Swedish literary field.

When Colm Tóibín in his speech stated that the “discovery of a (queer) history and a tradition and a sense of heritage must be done by each individual”, my dissertation shows that there indeed is a history of queerness also in Finnish literature. Yet, this history of queerness can best be found by someone who wants to and/or who is able to recognise it, since it is mostly cloaked and needs to be discovered by methods that go beyond a common reading or understanding.

## Bibliography

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Alexandra Stang’s Ph.D. dissertation *Possibilities, Silences. The Publishing and Reception of Queer Topics in Finland during the Interwar Years (and Beyond)* was publicly discussed on 27 November 2015 at the department of Comparative Literature, University of Helsinki. Opponent was professor Sanna Karkulehto, University of Jyväskylä, and Custodian was professor Hannu K. Riikonen, University of Helsinki.

Stang’s dissertation is available in electronic form through the E-thesis service: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/157585>