

## Original Article

# Emotional Academia and a Queer Feud

Anna Nygren

Department of Literature, Åbo Akademi, Finland. / Artistic Faculty, Gothenburg University, Sweden.

[anna.nygren@gu.se](mailto:anna.nygren@gu.se)

Received: 10 February 2023; Revised: 17 February 2023; Accepted: 24 February 2023; Published: 01 April 2023

**Abstract** - This article reflects on the emotional aspects of reading through the queerness of life. Readings during childhood affect the queer child's mind – when other queer references are absent, and literature becomes the only area that mirrors one's desires. Those early readings do, this article argues, affect later views on what is a possible relationship, what is a fictional and artistic desire, and patterns of reading – including academic interests. The article uses an autoethnographical method to revisit the author's early academic or essayistic writings and use the overlapping of literature and life as a way to understand queer desires and possibilities to think about oneself.

**Keywords** - Affect, Feminism, Nordic literature, Reader experience, Queer.

## 1. Introduction: Emotional Academia

I talk to my professor about my first experience of lesbian love. Growing up in a small rural town in Sweden, even in the 1990s, queerness was very much absent. I never experienced anything other than heteronormative love relationships – except my deep love for my best friend. I loved her, but describing my love as love was impossible. Still, our bond was so deep – at least my bond to her. At the age of thirteen, in 2003, I found Maria Lang's novel *Mördaren ljuger inte ensam* [*The Murder does not Lie Alone*] (1949). My mother had it on her bookshelf; she had all of Lang's books. Maria Lang is the pen name for Dagmar Lange, and she wrote more than forty crime novels – being one of the first to introduce the genre in Swedish. This particular novel has a lesbian twist: the murderer is a woman, killing another woman, not because they love the same man, but because Viveca loves Marianne – the woman she kills. Much later, I read what Emma Donoghue writes in *Inseparable: Desire between women in literature* (2010):

Although lesbian sex has rarely been criminalized in law, it has often been presented as at least borderline: vaguely, murkily criminal. Moreover, in literature, it is often associated with murder. Lesbians kill their male rivals, their own husbands or suitors, and even their own mothers. Often they murder their women lovers.[9]

## 2. What I Learned from this

At age thirteen, reading about Viveca murdering Marianne taught me: My love for girls is dangerous; it makes *me* dangerous. The only possible way forward in this love is death, even murder, to become a murderer and then kill oneself as well (that is what Viveca does).

*I can't remember talking to my mother about the lesbian motive. I can't remember talking to her like that. I was anorectic at the moment, and our conversations were very much infected. Afterwards, I wonder what she thought, what she knew, what she felt. Did she remember Viveca's love? Did she give me the book for a reason? She knew I*



*loved the fictional horses, the fictional love for horses, a love not marked by marriage, childbirth, or family. Did she think I would love that kind of love that was not this kind of life as well, a love that was just deeply emotional. I still don't know.*

I talked to my professor about this; she pointed out how this shows an aspect of reading rarely discussed within literature studies. Although there has been an “affective turn” – driven partly by Sara Ahmed’s influence – there is a limit to the effects studied. Effects in the literature include fictional characters’ effects and the effects of the reader. Studying the effects of texts necessarily needs to centre the text – but where is the border between text and life to be drawn?

Reading lesbian murders as the only possible (or rather impossible) queer love affected my reading as well as my life. After that, all my relationships have been destructive. I have always felt that love hurts – and that it *should* hurt. It cannot be otherwise. This shift affects into effects. The effects of the effects run through my life. Furthermore, part of my life is my literature.

As a queer autistic child (though I was not diagnosed until the age of 28) I was a strange being, mostly alone, finding my friends in books. I read and read. Reading became my way of relating to the world. There was nothing but books. This strong emotional bond to books follows me into my academic studies of texts. I can never truly separate myself from my reading – the scientific distance is impossible, and I always struggle, and struggle, and struggle, to follow the academic structures and not be too emotional.

But then I wonder: What knowledge might there be in the emotional that the distanced study might overlook?

The concept of reading has been rethought and rethought again. In a Swedish context (the context through which I write), the influence of Toril Moi, Rita Felski and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has been most noticed the last decade. Moi’s “philosophical reading” (2017), Felski’s *Uses of Literature* (2008) and Sedgwick’s “reparative and paranoid readings” (1995) draw a complex map of how reading may be done, how fiction is *in itself* a theory, and how this is a way of opening up the strict division between theory and fiction, academia and art. What these texts do, is also the point at the method of reading – even though the term “method” is refused. It is the *doing of reading*.

This doing has a tradition within the queer. Susan Striker does, in “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” (1994), take the emotional position of the monster to understand the transgender rage. This rage is her own rage. This is a way of using literature to understand one’s own life. I think my child’s reading has the same qualities. Though mostly unconsciously, I understood something about my desire, my body, and my love. But reading *before* experiencing relationships, I let the textual experience define how the actual relationships could be. I do life *through text*.

I did not realize this until I told my professor about this crime reading and mystery reading. This *first thing* became what I always (unconsciously) try to find in later writings and reading. Reading, writing, thinking, loving, and living melt together. It is totally confusing.

I find destructive lesbian love in the writings of Tove Jansson and Nina Bouraoui. I read their works much later in life when my relationships were established as confused and impossible. The reflection of my evil love is to be found in feeling the evilness of the murderer in Bouraoui’s neurotic analysis of the cruelty of desire and Jansson’s nuanced depictions of same-sex manipulative love.

After rediscovering the child reader, still within me, poking my brain and disturbing my analysis, I remember an essay I wrote some seven years ago on one of Jansson's novels. My love interest infects my academic interest. The analysis of the text works as a kind of hysteric desire to understand my evil love as *also love*. I read my own text, never published. I read, and I think of the evil.

And I need it to be read. I realize I need everyone to read because I cannot find *one person to love* – because I would kill her – and I need to make everyone love me (with a love that could also be a kind of hate).

Contextualizing the academic desire within a sexual, emotional structure points to the situatedness of knowledge production. I can only write about myself. *Through* me, the multiple me with it multiple times. I feel bad about it but must comfort the evil child. Trying to think while so emotional. Rediscover, reread, rewrite.

Next, the essay on *a queer feud*. Reading hate as love. Evil as, all right.

### 3. A Queer Feud

Tove Jansson's *Den ärliga bedragaren* [*The True Deceiver*] (1982) depicts two women, Anna and Katri, and Katri's brother, living together. Katri and her brother Mats, both seen as odd and tricky and Mats as "simple," move in with Anna, an elderly picture book artist, in a way cunningly devised by Katri. I read the text as a depiction of a cohabitation that differs in every way from a normative relationship. Between Katri and Anna, there is a kind of strange friendship. Everything is a contract – here, according to Katri, there should be no emotions, yet I read an enormous sadness and longing. The friendship between Katri and Anna could just as easily be defined as enmity. They do not like each other. But they still live in a symbiotic relationship. I want to argue with this text that Jansson's novel depicts a kind of queer enmity, and I want to try to draw these contours.

In her article "Queerblivanden" (Queer Becomings), Tove Solander describes how a Deleuzian reading works in a queer way[25]. Deleuzian reading, unlike psychoanalytic reading, is not about digging beneath the surface of the text but about seeing shifts. I will try to use this way of seeing displacements to analyze the relationship that emerges between Katri and Anna in Jansson's novel. Their relationship is often, on the surface, in expressed feelings of discomfort, but there are small shifts over the course of the novel, which make the characters more and more dependent on each other.

Ann-Sofie Lönngren describes a queer approach to ecocriticism in "Queer Ecocriticism." In the article, she shows how nature in literature is often framed in a heterosexual pattern of binaries. She argues that a queer understanding of nature can provide new approaches to the text[21]. I will use such a perspective in my analysis of nature in *The True Deceiver*, which is significant, to say the least.

My understanding of queerness is not only about seeing non-heterosexual relationships and leakage but also about seeing how relationships are transgressive in various ways. I want to explore how these relationships can skew views of love, hate, intimacy, desire and need.

#### 3.1. The Kling Siblings' Otherness and Sibling Love

Mats and Katri Kling are norm-breakers from the start and in their own right. They are seen as odd. Mats are described as a bit of an idiot – he cannot understand enough, but he is kind and good. Katri makes others in the community feel uneasy. She never helps in the conversation and does not shy away from uncomfortable silences or confrontations. She is good with numbers and burns with a strong pathos of justice (which, later in the novel, becomes more and more of a negotiation). She does not say anything she does not mean and never tries to be agreeable. Even in her appearance, something is disturbing – her yellow eyes look more like animal eyes than human ones.

This otherness creates a gap between the siblings and the rest of society. The relationships in which Katri and Mats are involved are thus necessarily odd. Their relationship with other people cannot fit into the norm because the siblings do not understand or care about how normal relationships work.

There is a strange kind of sibling love between the siblings. Katri never touches Mats; not until the very end of the novel does she physically touch him. However, he is still her everything. The usual forms of love notes cannot describe her way of showing love. But she gives him her all. She argues with her own sense of justice to lure money from Anna, which becomes a boat for Mats. Everything Katri does is thus centered around Mats, without physical closeness or tender words ever existing.

### 3.2. *Diagnosing an Autistic Relationship*

The diagnostic criteria for autism include having difficulty interpreting communication, experiencing emotions in a way that can be described as complicated or overwhelming, and often engaging in narrow interests or compulsive rituals in their behaviour. Central to the autism diagnosis, however, is the problem of social interaction.

I would diagnose the triangle drama that *The True Deceiver* describes as autistic. Normative human modes of communication, like being nice, do not exist. And Katri's way of analyzing her actions and those of others differs from how they are typically understood. Katri needs a pattern to understand how relationships work. She bases her understanding on a contract model:

As Katri continued seriously, a contract is a much stranger than you might think. It does not just bind; I have noticed that people can be relieved by living under a contract. It frees them from indecision and confusion; they no longer have to choose.[15]

This is similar in many ways to how the autistic brain works. Social interaction never happens by feeling; it does not come spontaneously. Instead, it needs to be learned as a form of game rules. These rules become central to Anna's, Katri's and Mats' relationship.

### 3.3. *The Relationship between Symbiosis and Intrusion*

In the first place, perhaps Katri's way of getting into Anna Aemelin's house and life can be seen as an intrusion. Katri helps. She points out how others deceive Anna, small things only, but still, small deceptions, which shake Anna's trust in others. Katri takes care of the things Anna finds difficult, like cooking and writing letters – she relieves Anna of all everyday chores. This gradually creates a total emptiness and discomfort for Anna. Katri rearranges Anna's house. She wraps all the food in the plastic fridge and organises all the meals. She shows intrusive and hostile care.

But Anna's way of handling the dog (see below) can also be seen as an intrusion. Anna resists Katri's benevolence and organisation.

While the relationship is a form of mutual intrusion into the private sphere, a symbiosis develops. Katri needs Anna, the money, and the need to feel competent. Anna needs Katri; she is helped by everything Katri does. I would describe this symbiosis as a double dependency. They depend on each other, but a tender dislike is created through the dependence. Every little movement becomes a nuisance, but this annoyance also becomes addictive. I see it as a destructive symbiosis, where boundaries are dissolved. The rules, which form the basis of the relationship, are a form of cross-border rules. They blur the contours between the needs of the different bodies. Personality and the private are dissolved, and existence becomes porous and vulnerable.

### 3.4. *The Dog*

Katri has a dog. She does not call the dog anything; it has no name. If she mentions it, she just says the dog. This is a way of keeping the dog away from the human. It remains wild and free, a subject marked only by dog-ness, not by the human. When Katri moves in with Anna, the dog frightens Anna, and to be less frightened, she gives it a name:

Anna had given the dog a name because the nameless has a tendency to grow; she stripped the animal of its dangerousness by calling it Teddy[15].

This is a form of abuse. The dog, Teddy, has now become something else. He has been removed from Katri's speechlessness.

The rack was raised, head turned to the side but gaze straight into hers, and Katri saw and understood that her animal had become an adversary. She went home to Anna and said: Anna, you have destroyed my dog. You have done it in secret. I cannot trust it anymore[15].

What Anna has done is that she has been kind to the dog the way people are kind to dogs. She has given it softness, treats, and play. This has ruined the relationship between the dog and Katri, which was characterised by hardness - not love, but respect and tolerance (that is a lie, I read it as love, a deep, cold love); their relationship has been ruined. It ends with the dog attacking Katri, tearing her coat, and then running away. Katri talks about what has been:

What do you think? Haven't you seen how I walked through the village with the dog, superior? We were close together as one creature; the dog was confident and proud as a king. Every dog was silent when we arrived. We could rely on each other, we did not leave each other behind, we were one, a whole, and I had expected that...[15]

I read Katri's and the dog's relationship as a form of symbiosis – similar to Katri's and Anna's. It is a form of a contract of nature that applies. They are interdependent, a relationship as mutual and fair as possible. However, it is almost incomprehensible from a human perspective because Katri is not trying to humanize the dog. Rather, it is like the dog is holding Katri in something non-human or more-than-human. When this is destroyed, it is like a depiction of colonization. The humanistic has invaded the wild, and the wild can never be the same again.

### 3.5. *The Art and the Weather*

The environment plays a central role in Jansson's novel. Society is marked by a long and cold winter. There is so much snow that normal civilization becomes impossible. The snow brings people closer and makes everyday life something that does not flow easily. As in many of Jansson's texts, people live very close to nature, depend on it, are affected by it, and are at its mercy. The snow in *The True Deceiver* is never valued. It just is. Moreover, it sets the stage for what happens next.

Nature is also central to Anna's art. She is a master at painting lifelike, small and detailed watercolours depicting forest land. She lives very near to the land. Sees the incredible beauty in this. In order to make her books marketable as picture books, she paints little flowery rabbits, but these always seem like a form of compromise.

I see life in the snow as a kind of state of emergency. As much as contracts create rules for coexistence, so does the snow. It becomes a way of socializing that is totally characterized by cold.

### 3.6. A Queer Feud

I want to read the hostility and unpleasantness in *The True Deceiver* as a form of love. Perhaps it is difficult to do so. But I see tender violence, or a cold love, in the way the characters are drawn to each other and become dependent on each other.

Towards the end of the book, when Anna is countered by the neighbours, saying that she may not feel good about having Katri so close, Anna defends Katri:

Anna continued: 'Katri is honest! She is the only one you can trust!'[15]

Katri is the only one. Moreover, for Katri, Anna is the only one except for Mats, who is there for both of them. In the midst of the hostility and conflict, there is an unwavering faith in each other. Dependence is not an easy conflict. No pure hatred. It's more as if *everything* fits into the relationship. An everything that is unlike anything else.

## 4. Conclusion

Through an autoethnographic method, this article has used memories of childhood readings and my own academic or essayistic writings reflecting on the emotional aspects of reading queerness. At the age of thirteen, in 2003, I read Maria Lang's novel *Mördaren ljuger inte ensam* [*The Murder doesn't Lie Alone*] (1949), a novel with a lesbian twist: the murderer is a woman killing another woman, not because they love the same man, but because Viveca loves Marianne – the woman she kills. Reading about Viveca murdering Marianne taught me: My love for girls is dangerous. It makes *me* dangerous. Years later, in my early academic career, I found the dangerous, queer relationships in Tove Jansson's novel *Den ärliga bedragaren* [*The True Deceiver*] (1982), and I write an essay about this. Now, I revisit this piece of writing, trying to trace my emotional reading and writing patterns. My love interest infects my academic interest. The analysis of the text works as a kind of hysteric desire to understand my evil love as *also love*.

I read my own text, never published. I read, and I think of the evil. Contextualizing the academic desire within a sexual, emotional structure points to the situatedness of knowledge production. I can only write about myself. *Through me*, the multiple me with it multiple times. I feel bad about it but must comfort the evil child. Trying to think while so emotional. Rediscover, reread, rewrite. These kinds of emotional aspects of academia are seldom discussed but are hidden within professional structures of paranoia. Making these structures of (queer) desires visible open academic thinking for discussing the overlapping between life and literature, intellectual and emotional work, and desire and darkness. The question of queerness depicted as/through evilness or destructive powers further pinpoints how a specifically queer academic position needs to be aware of how these moral and ethical issues influence our view of ourselves, our desires and our possibility of love without judgement.

## References

- [1] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Durham, Edinburgh University Press, 2004. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [2] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 2006. [[CrossRef](#)] [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [3] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 2010. [[CrossRef](#)] [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [4] Nina Bouraoui, *Pojkflickan* (*Garçon manqué*, 2000), Swedish translation: M. Björkman, Stockholm, Sweden: Modernista, 2004.
- [5] Nina Bouraoui, *Mina onda tankar* (*Mes mauvaises pensées*, 2005), Swedish translation: M. Björkman, Stockholm, Sweden: Modernista, 2006.



- [6] Nina Bouraoui, *Innan männen* (*Avant les hommes*, 2007), Swedish translation: M. Björkman, Stockholm, Sweden: Modernista, 2008.
- [7] Nina Bouraoui, *Kärlekens geografi* (*Appelez-moi par mon prénom*, 2009), Swedish translation: M. Björkman, Stockholm, Sweden: Modernista, 2010.
- [8] Nina Bouraoui, *Om lycka* (*La vie heureuse*, 2002), Swedish translation: M. Björkman, Stockholm, Sweden: Modernista, 2016.
- [9] Emma Donoghue, *Inseparable: Desire between Women in Literature*, Alfred A. Knopf., New York, US: 2010.
- [10] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Hoboken, US: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [11] Rita Felski, "After Suspicion," in *Profession*, no. 1, pp. 28-35, 2009. [[Google Scholar](#)]
- [12] Rita Felski, and Susan Stanford Friedman, *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, John Hopkins University Press, 2013. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [13] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, University of Chicago Press, 2015. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [14] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, University of Chicago Press, 2020. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [15] Tove Jansson, *Den ärliga bedragaren*, in *Romaner*, Stockholm, Sweden: Modernista, 2017. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [16] Tove Jansson, *Rent spel*, in *Romaner*, Stockholm, Sweden: Modernista, 2017.
- [17] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (ed.), *Shame & Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 1995.
- [18] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (ed.), *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 1997.
- [19] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 2003. [[Google Scholar](#)]
- [20] Maria Lang, *Mördaren ljuger inte ensam*, Stockholm, Sweden: Norstedts, 1949.
- [21] Ann-Sofie Lönnngren, *Queer ekokritik – exemplet Strindberg* in Kivilaakso, Ann-Sofie Lönnngren & Rita Paqvalén (ed.) *Queera läsningar*, Stockholm, Sweden: Rosenlarv, 2012.
- [22] Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1999. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [23] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford University Press, 2002. [[Google Scholar](#)]
- [24] Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell*, Chicago, US: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[Publisher Link](#)]
- [25] Tove Solander, *Queerblivanden* in Kivilaakso, Ann-Sofie Lönnngren & Rita Paqvalén (ed.) *Queera läsningar*, Stockholm, Sweden: Rosenlarv, 2012. [[Google Scholar](#)]