

## **Intellectual Outsiders**

### **Women's university novels published 1900–1943 and their historical background**

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The purpose of this paper is to address the question of female students and of Swedish universities, as treated in women's university novels published from 1915 until 1943. In this paper, I will partly be referring to my dissertation, which is already in print and to be defended the last of September. It is a gender study of Swedish-university fiction, mainly of novels, but also of short stories, published from 1904 until 1943 by female and male authors. My goal was to find both similarities and differences between their way of depicting the university. The method I have used can be seen as reading the novels as a kind of a 'dialogue', or a discourse, where male and female authors and narrative voices complete, confirm or contradict each other in their way of depicting certain motives.

To begin with, the genre called *university novel* should be briefly introduced here. A *university novel* is a full-length work of fiction, which depicts the university as both an institution of higher education and as an intellectual milieu. The main character in a *university novel* is always a graduate or undergraduate student or a faculty member and the daily life of the university is the main theme. The authors have usually personal experience of higher learning; they have either graduated from a university or at least been students. The typical narrative pattern of university novels in the Western tradition can be described in the following way:

*The main character arrives at the university with great expectations; soon she or he gets disillusioned and dissociates herself /himself from the set of values represented by the academy. The student starts thus to seek for different values and for a new goal in life, within or outside the academy. The former means that the student, after surviving her or his inner crisis, finally adapts to the model of learning and to the philosophy represented by the university. The student's disappointment with the university may also result in an abrupt break with it and even with academic professions in general.*

As the pattern indicates, university novels both in Sweden and abroad have always been more or less critical of the “official” idea of education and of the situation of the students, as well as of the very idea of the university. As to Scandinavian literature, it has been claimed that particularly from 1880s and onwards, the negative attitude towards the university as a place of learning became a significant feature of the genre. The so-called Modern-Breakthrough period, an intellectual and literary movement of the late 19 century, has been regarded as a new impulse into the development of the genre. Other strictly literary influences as French naturalism and German social criticism were also of great importance. Another reason why the criticism of university education should intensify and become more severe than ever was also the rapid industrial and social development, which in itself caused a general negative attitude towards the existing system of education.

Neither university novels nor any literary fiction should ever be regarded as a historical document. Still, one may assume that the authors often use real university and real students, possibly even themselves, as the literary subject in their novels. It may thus be of interest to give a brief historical background to the novels that I am addressing in this paper, especially concerning women student-pioneers in the late 19 century.

The university novel has always been a sort of *Bildungsroman* and a male-dominated genre, both in Sweden and abroad, as women writers had not contributed to it in any significant way until the beginning of 20 century. The reason was of course that women had been excluded from higher education until the end of 19 century, and from men’s colleges at Oxford and Cambridge until the middle of 20 century.

Swedish women were finally allowed to study in 1873. The very first female student in Sweden was Betty Pettersson, a saddler’s daughter from Gotland, who registered at Uppsala University 1872 a year before women won access to higher education. She thus still needed a special permission by the King. Women’s entrance into higher education and to professions was a significant political change and the first female academics were very much aware of it. They knew their mission was to become a pattern for future female students. Among first-generation women students there were several who took the opportunity of establishing careers of their own, despite all the rules and regulations that stood in their way. Most of the female students of the late 19 century would in a way or other get involved in suffrage movements. Several were to become writers, journalists and well-known debaters.

Despite getting access to the university, the history of female student pioneers in Sweden is one of intellectual outsiders, both in reality and in university novels by women authors.

The very first Swedish university-novel written by a former female student was *Suzanne* by Ellen Landquist, published in 1915. In 1911, Greta Beckius's, a former student and a close friend of Landquist's, wrote a novel about a women student from Uppsala, which she called *Marit Grene*. Due to Beckius's suicide a couple months later, the novel was never to be published, and later on it was partly destroyed by her sister who regarded it as 'immoral'. *Suzanne* by Ellen Landquist was followed by *Her Fathers Daughter* from 1920, an at the time immensely popular novel by Lydia Wahlström, a well-known historian and suffrage activist. In 1927 the feminist novelist Margit Palmaer published *A Student*, and 1931 *The Moon above Lund* was published by Ingeborg Björklund. *A Poor Student* by Gunhild Tegen was published 1934, and *A Portray of a Shingled Girl* by Viveka Starfelt appeared 1943. All these novels but one are about Uppsala and its university.<sup>1</sup>

The women would conquer the genre, but without fully adopting its distinctive features. The reason was that the traditional university novel or *Bildungsroman* simply did not fit their purpose. Female writers would rather debate women's subordination in the society and in the university milieu of the fin-de-siècle. The suffrage movement influenced them, as well as the appearance of the idea of the so-called Modern Woman and as well as the debate about morality, sexuality and equality between sexes. On the contrary, men writers, who continued to depict the university after 1900, usually followed the tradition of the genre. In several cases they even strove to write pure pastiches of the 19th century university novel.

In their novels, both women and men authors often follow the typical narrative pattern I presented above, or at least some of its elements. Still, there are several differences between both groups. Using the categories of 'public' and 'private' sphere developed by Jürgen Habermas, one could say that early university novels by women authors to a much greater extent treat the private sphere of life that is the subjects of love, sexuality, and the problem of choosing between marriage and career. On the contrary, male authors treat much more the public sphere of the university, which is synonymous to all the activities in the classrooms and all the ceremonies and traditions by which the university preserves the very idea of its intellectual and pedagogical mission.

Similarly to the students treated in men's novels, the main character in women's novels becomes often disillusioned shortly after her arrival to the university. In Ellen Landquist's novel,

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Uppsala had been the place women student's greatest pioneer- achievements; here women obtained their very first Ph.D., their first senior research fellowship and their first physician degree.

criticism of the contemporary system of education resembles the one by the men authors of the 1880s; in the eyes of Suzanne, the female main character, university education is worthless as it has no practical application outside the classrooms. To Suzanne, a middle-class woman who is dreaming of learning agriculture and becoming a farmer, acquiring 'universal knowledge' appears to be a waste of time. Thereby she represents the students who abandon the university on behalf of other, non-academic professions. Still, the main reason for her unhappiness and loneliness as a student has to do with her private life; believing in the new ideal of partnership between sexes, and trusting one of her male student-mates, she gets raped by him. That experience forces her to leave Uppsala, in order to recover and to rethink her idea of love and of intellectual partnership between sexes.

Also in Margit Palmaer's novel, the motive of the female student's total and deep disappointment at her studies in Uppsala has to do with her private life. Simultaneously with losing the man she loves, she also loses her self-consciousness. Still, in Palmaer's novel, the motive of disillusionment has primarily to do with the official sphere of the Academy. It thus resembles the one treated by male authors of the early 20th century. According to the main character in Palmaer's novel, the university milieu is supposed not only to disseminate universal knowledge but also to cultivate its pupils. Despite the main character's expectations, out-of-date pedagogical methods are soon encountered. The expected dialogue in the classrooms turns out to be a boring monologue by narrow-minded professors, to whom the totally uninterested students hardly manage to listen. The majority of the staff proves to be conservative, egoistic and indifferent toward any new ideas. Instead of encouraging the students in creative work and individual interpretations, the only thing the staff demands is learning by heart from the handbooks. Here Margit Palmaer's novel is particularly interesting in comparison with Gustaf Hellström's *A Very Young Man* which appeared almost at the same time, that is in 1923. Both novels indicate that young people in the beginning of the 20 century still represented the traditional idea of humanist *bildning*, an idea that did not differ very much from that of Kant and Herder. Further, in comparing with the novels depicting the 1880s, it can be stated that the idea of *bildning* treated in the novels remained in many ways unchanged over a period of almost forty years.

The novel *The Moon Above Lund* from 1931 treats female student's intellectual coteries as influenced by Nietzsche's idea of a new, stronger human race. Young female students are being portrayed both as suffragists and as spokesmen for the Modern Woman, who should be intellectually independent. As in the novel *Suzanne*, the main character's problems in *The Moon*

*Above Lund* at the university have partly to do with complications in her private life. An unexpected pregnancy and a secret abortion make her revise both her view of the opposite sex, of the female student community, and of own academic career. The author approaches also the question of hypocrisy in the patriarchal society concerning prostitution and venereal diseases. The novel can thus be regarded as a critical treatment of social values represented by the early 20-century middle-class.

That gradual change in women's way of treating the public sphere indicates, that women students probably did not 'dare' to criticize the university until they got more numerous and thus more established in it in the late 1920-ties and 1930-ties. However, as female students got better established in the public sphere of the university, they soon adopted its traditions and regarded themselves as its solid members. Despite being treated as outsiders within the university, their consciousness of belonging to the academic community made them regard the university milieu as quite homogeneous and as an intellectual coalition against the rest of the society. Criticism of the university and of the education system, similar to those delivered by their male contemporaries, appeared in the novels written by female academics in the 1920s and 1930s.

As was the case with male students, young women of the early 20th century believed in a moral and esthetic cultivation based on detailed knowledge of the literary canon, art and philosophy. What is even more significant, in the novels they are often said to regard humanist education as a 'women's mission', that is, as a way of improving society and the relationships between sexes. This indicates the influence of Ellen Key, one of the greatest of the Swedish theorists of women's liberation movement of the fin-de-siècle. It is to be observed however, that the novels depicting the university of the 1910s and 1920s not only discussed the Romantic idea of *Bildung*, but also the influence of Nietzsche and of the nationalist movement. To the female characters, the idea of improving society by disseminating *Bildung* was in some cases almost synonymous with preserving the purity of the German race. Surprisingly, this has nothing corresponding to it in the novels by their male contemporaries.

As to women author's critical attitude towards the early 20-century Swedish university, it may be of interest to compare them to their male contemporaries, as well as to their 19th-century predecessors. In women's university novels, the motive of loneliness and disillusionment was used in a different way, and usually much more complex than in the texts by the male authors. The reason was that women's novels were also meant to illustrate the vulnerable position of women

students in the university milieu of the fin-de-siècle.<sup>2</sup> To the female characters, the experience of loneliness is actually as much about gender as about loosing faith in the university. The literary portrait of female student-pioneers shows young women fighting for equality between sexes, a motive obviously taken from real life. As they could not participate in forming a system in which they were only regarded as outsiders, they fought in the first place for securing their own legitimacy in the university milieu.

It seems pretty clear though. Both men's and women's texts should be interpreted in a gender perspective. The different conditions of the sexes both in public and in private have strongly influenced the university novels of the early 20 century. Equally important however is the historical context of the development of the European universities and their traditions. As the genre is to a great extent a product of a very specific academic culture, a better understanding of the nature of the university as unique social phenomenon makes it easier to interpret university novels as a genre.

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<sup>2</sup> Although written between 1904-1943, the majority of the university novels which are the subject of my thesis depict the period 1895-1900. Considering the very time of their edition however, the novels themselves may not be called 'university novels of the fin-de-siècle', a mistake that is often being made in discussions and interpretations.