

Readers' Reactions to Emotionally Evocative and Morally Provocative Fiction

A Study of Young Adults' Readings of Two Short Stories

Af Skans Kersti Nilsson

Abstract

Denna receptionsstudie behandlar unga vuxnas reaktioner på emotionellt laddad och moraliskt provocerande fiktion. Unga vuxna befinner sig i den period då personligheten formeras och omvärlden integreras. Vad händer med den personlighetsutvecklande läsning som förknippats med skönlitteratur i dagens internetsamhälle? I ett pågående forskningsprojekt kommer dessa frågor att studeras på empirisk väg. Här redovisas en explorativ studie baserad på grundad teori, som visar att flertalet läser med sig själva i fokus. Exempel på subjektiva lässtrategier funna är existentiell, interaktiv och kreativ läsning.

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Introduction

Literature as a source of personal and ethical development is mainly discussed within the study of literature (Nussbaum, 1990; Carey, 2005; Feliski, 2008), and didactics (Rosenblatt, 2002; Torell, 2002; Kåreland, 2009). The study of reading literature needs both theoretical and empirical approaches. The empirical study of literature and media has since 1987 been gathered within the interdisciplinary scope of the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and Media (IGEL). Besides literature and media, this scope also includes psychology, sociology, linguistics, cultural studies, pedagogy, neurophysiology and communication and information sciences. In library and information science the empirical study of literature and reading is exposed within user studies, mediating literature and in sociology of literature (Ross, 1999, 2006; Karner Smidt, 2002; Balling, 2009). Literature reading and its functions is an important research-field and of great relevance in today's society when fiction and narration appear in various kinds of media besides printed books like films and story-telling in various computerized forms. The Swedish Research Council recently founded a research programme, "Man's needs and use of Fiction" (2010), to emphasize the importance of research in this field. One of the projects in this programme is "Reading Fiction in the Internet Society. The Function of Literature in the Personal Development and Social Orientation of Young Adults", a collaboration between the Literature Department at Uppsala University and The Swedish School of Li-

brary and Information Science in Borås. The project which is distinctively empirical, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, will go on for three years.

Aiming at developing questions to questionnaires and interview-guides, a pilot study was designed to explore young adults' reactions to two short stories, one emotionally evocative and one morally provocative story. Below, this study carried out 2009-2010, is presented.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to identify young adults' reactions to two selected short stories and to analyze what categories and characteristics might be found; further, to study if reading strategies in connection to categories and characteristics might show reading approaches significant to personal and ethical development. The research questions are:

What emotions, associations and reflections emerge in written comments by young adults in their reactions to reading emotionally evocative and ethically provocative fiction? What kinds of fiction reading or uses of fiction might appear, and how do they relate to personal and ethical development?

Data collection

The material comprises readers' reactions to two short stories. The first one, "Kaninernas himmel" ("Rabbit Heaven") by Inger Edelfeldt (b. 1965), is published in *Den förunderliga kameleonten* (1995). Briefly, the story is telling about a 13-year old girl's handling of the death of her mother. It is a poetic story written in third person. The girl finds herself left alone, singled out in her environment. Her father, isolating himself in his grief, is unable to help her. Finally, the girl finds comfort and reconciliation in nature at the sight of rabbits playing at dusk. The second story, "Grannar" ("Neighbors") by Raymond Carver (1938-1988), was first published in the short story collection *Will you please be quiet, please?* (1976) and in Swedish translation in *Genvägar* (1994). The story tells about two married couples, the Millers and the Stones. The Stones have been more successful in career, and therefore have more

money to spend on travelling and social life than the Millers. When the Stones go on vacations, the Millers feed their cat and look after their apartment. The key to the Stones' apartment gives the Millers access to pry into their private life. They try their clothes, drink their alcohol and use their bed. "Grannar" is an exponent of Dirty Realism, a literary movement characterized by economy with words and a focus on surface description.

To this pilot study respondents were recruited among undergraduates at Uppsala University and University of Borås. Effected bias was reconsidered. The target group, young adults, was defined as 19 – 29 years of age. Course directors and teachers were contacted. Scientific and ethical demands were notified. The respondents were informed verbally and written. Instructions were delivered as to the task, which was to read the story carefully and to write down the emotions, thoughts, associations and reflections caused by reading the stories. They were also requested to read the stories several times before writing their experiences as comprehensively as possible. Finally, they were informed that their views would be treated in confidence, and that they had the right to end their participation in the project. Informed consent was registered through deliverance of comments sent via e-mail.

Articulation of basic data

About 150 students were invited of whom 22 participated in the study. Three respondents appeared to be 30 years of age or older and therefore had to be dropped. Attending the study were 19 respondents, 15 females and 4 males. The spread in age between 19-29 was: 19(3), 20(5), 21(3), 23(3), 24(1), 26(1), 28(2), 29(1). The geographical spread was 13 from Uppsala, and 6 from Borås. The distribution among fields of study was: Literature, basic level (7); literature in Teaching programme (2); literature at doctoral level (1) and Rhetoric and literary communication (1); Library programme (3); Preschool teaching programme (1); others (4). The following table shows the respondents by their code numbers.

Sex/code numb	Age	Study field/program	Other
F1	20	Literature	-
F2	19	Literature	-
F3	20	Literature	Cashier
F4	21	-	-
F5	19	Literature	-
F6	23	Literature/teaching	-
F7	24	Literature	BA soc science/hum
F8	19	Literature	-
F9	21	Rhetoric & lit com	-
F10	20	-	-
F11	21	-	Home help
F12	20	Library program	-
F13	23	Library program	Teacher
F14	28	-	-
F15	23	Preschool program	-
M1	20	Literature	-
M2	29	Teaching program	Humanities
M3	28	Literature doctoral	BA, MA
M4	26	Library program	-

Table 1. Respondents: sex, age, study field, other (n=19)

Method and processing of data

According to the aim, to study and adapt data unprejudiced, an inductive approach was chosen, more specifically grounded theory (Hartman, 2001). Grounded theory implies repeated selection, data collection and analysis: "... först samlar man in data från ett urval, och därefter görs ett nytt urval deduktivt baserat på analysen" (ibid., p. 36. In transl.: "... first of all data is collected from a selection, and then a new selection is made deductively based on the ... analysis"). The process can be described as interactive. As data is constantly compared in between, the theoretical ideas will appear more clearly: "Teorin beskriver inte data, den grundas i data" (ibid., p. 46. In transl.: "The theory does not describe data, it is grounded in data."). The material was read through several times, and a number of categories, phenomena, were identified. These were arranged in one core category (all readers' reactions to the two short

stories), with relevant sub-categories. The material was searched through once again in order to find out which qualities or characteristics might be attached to the categories. Thereafter, connections were analyzed and hypotheses were developed.

While processing "Kaninernas himmel" and "Granar", following sub-categories were found connected to the core category, a summarizing concept to the sub-categories, which were all readers' reactions to these short stories:

Emotional reactions: Reactions to the emotional dimensions in the text through expressions such as 'sad', 'warm', 'grief', 'disgust', 'frustration'.

Aesthetical reactions: Reactions to aesthetic, structural morphology and construction as well as evaluations on it, also intertextual comments to it.

Ethical/psychological reactions: Reactions to the ethical and/or psychological content.

Self-reflexive reactions: Associations and comments to personal experiences caused by the text.

Creative reactions: Free associations caused by the text, creative expansion of the text.

Then data was searched for characteristics and qualities related to the categories. The results of this processing show that characteristics and qualities in readers' reactions were attached to the reader's strategy to the text *as a whole* as self-related or text-related, i.e. show *subjective* or *objective* experiences of the text. The analysis show three possible attitudes to the stories: 1/Self-oriented and subjective; 2/ Text-oriented, objective and distanced; 3/ Both self-oriented and text-oriented. By coding, emotional, aesthetical, ethical/psychological and self-oriented reactions showed connections to subjective as well as to objective reading strategies. Creative reactions, though, only appear in connection to self-oriented, subjective reading strategy. Here follows some illuminating examples in translation.

Reactions to "Kaninernas himmel"

Emotional reactions

Environment and atmosphere make F3 associate to milk: "After a while, when I finally have found the

milk-metaphor, I simply think in terms of milk.” Like F1, her emotional reactions are even physical: “I was freezing quite a lot while reading the story; it seemed to be a cold climate in the text; mentally as well as bodily...”

Emotional reactions are primarily connected with a close and subjective relationship vis-à-vis the text. These are often followed by self-reflecting or creative reactions. According to this, F13 admits that her emotional reactions transform into self-reflexivity:

“I recognize myself in the description of the girl like a particular person in her grief, like a spirit who envisions eternity without it making any impression. I myself have reacted like this while being in distress. It gives a feeling of solidarity with the story and the author. [I was] affected in the middle of the story by a dreamlike, melancholy and shocking emotion. The story [then] turns claustrophobic, affections easy to recognize. A strong emotion of grief, loneliness and frustration alarms the reader. The end brings metaphysical and spiritual affections. That strong emotion fades away and turns into peace.”

Analogies and intertextual comments occur among readers’ reactions primarily in connection with subjective reading strategy. F13 thinks of books by Virginia Woolf: “... which I have always thought of as a mirror to my own thoughts and emotions.” Thus, this literature she uses for inner dialogue.

Aesthetic reactions

First of all F2 observes the aesthetic design of the story, therefore aesthetic and dissociative comments are predominant. F2 reacts negatively to the psychological shape of the girl who she finds “a little bit too insightful and mature to be 13 of age, I become a bit sceptical and think of it all as unrealistic.” The scenery with the rabbits at dusk makes F2 react very negatively. She decides to read the story once again to give it a second chance:

“But then I come to the gate and the rabbits, and I feel just as angry and frustrated, almost ... a bit disgusted. It is a strong word, but I frown at that schmaltzy picture with rabbits and cutesy. Yuck. [...] Think the title is goofy. Maybe just as good I didn’t notice it, then I would probably have condemned it before reading.”

F2’s reading strategy is distanced and distrustful; the reactions are mainly aesthetic and the evaluation highly negative. F2, as well as F8, seems to have closed the books to the 13-year old girl inside herself. Like F2, F8 and F11, M2 reacts distanced, aesthetic and with negative evaluation of the story: “This story has not a quick and ordinary language... The text is bombastic and poetic... I’ll soon become full up, to me it seems like the author chooses the wrong way... Inger Edelfeldt makes an honorable try, but it goes wrong...”

M3 finds the role of the reader split: “After the opening I approach the text from two directions, first identificatory and recognizing, then distanced and analyzing. I find a conflict between these approaches.” M3 is disappointed, but uncertain of why this disappointment is caused by conventional design of the story or if it is caused by “the reality in the fiction”.

Comments to other literary texts and intertextual references also occur among reactions with primarily distanced reading strategy towards the story. F2 refers to Göran Tunström’s novel *Juloratoriet*, (*The Christmas Oratorio*) which has made a deep impression on F2: “By the thought of this novel, I become even more disappointed on the story. It makes me want to read Tunström once again, almost for consolation.” F10 compares the story with Astrid Lindgren’s *Bröderna Lejonhjärta* (*The Brothers Lionheart*): “To reach new worlds after death is appealing to many people and even if we don’t believe in God, it is good for the heart to hope for a life after this.”

Ethical/psychological reactions

F11, F12 and F13 react on the adults’ treatment of the girl as less appropriate. F13 lays stress on the desolation: “In fact, the saddest thing in the story is maybe not the fact that the girl has lost her mother, but that she has no one to turn to.” Some respondents begin with strong reactions to the psychological dimension of the story. F4 considers the girl to have heavy feelings of guilt: “... she thinks she might be infected by death” and that the impersonation of the lonely wandering is leading to catharsis. F14 reacts in a similar way, saying that the girl “adjudges herself for her mother’s death”. Like F4, F14 finds the story being “a real therapy-story”.

Two respondents in teaching programmes, Swedish (F6) and Preschool (F15), connect their reactions into a future, professional context. F6 begins and ends her comments by evaluating the story. In between is established that: “My opinion is that one shouldn’t discuss all literary texts.” F15, on the other hand, reacts emotionally, ethically and psychologically very strong, as if she prepares herself for a job as a compassionate adult. She is absorbed by the story and comments it lively: “Because if this happens to anybody, one should just be there, with a positive disposition and listening. Simply just be there.”

Self-reflecting reactions

F3 immediately reacts by thinking of her dead grandmother, which arouses feelings of grief.

Even F7 connects to her own experiences of reflecting one-self through the eyes of others. F7 has similar kinds of experiences being a daughter of an alcoholic: “You don’t want to be a person people feel pity of, at least not for long. The worst thing is, I believe, that you can’t know if people join you because they like you or if they just pity you.” Similar to F3 and F7, M1 responds spontaneously self-reflexive:

“When a person close to us, perhaps even the closest one of them all, disappears, something inside breaks apart. Hellish is the surging feeling that arises then and seems so doggedly relentless, because then it is difficult for us to look beyond the massive darkness lain round our every day. [...] How I during some weeks just stared into the white walls of my room, wondering why the paint ran down though being dry.”

M1’s strong, emotional experience turns into ethical and psychological reflections: “After a while it is important to try to become aware of one’s emotions on this, and then to try to get away from it. Unfortunately everybody can’t manage this responsibility, but remains in the mud that draws one even further down.”

Creative reactions

A creative reaction implies that the reader’s fantasy is so stimulated by the text, that he or she exceeds it. Comments by F9 give obvious examples of this:

“The first picture I imagine is a church and a graveyard seen from above. Blue sky and yellow grass from a hot summer. While reading, I see places from real life, although not people. I’ll be-

come fascinated by seeing a house, a forest, a market square in reality where so much has been taken place in my reading imagination.”

F9 continue reflecting this ability, which necessarily doesn’t make her loyal to the theme of the story:

“I am free in my imagination concerning pictures. This is what makes imagination so fantastic: Everything is possible! I imagine what is clearly said in books, but at the same time I give myself freedom of imagining something or somebody and sometimes it is contrary to what the book actually says. “Kaninernas himmel” crackles of pictures and impressions from when I read it. And always I see places I’ve been at a long time ago or recently. My old grammar-school, huge windows, empty corridors, a hoop with broken net, a blue-black, shining car. Pictures often unspoken, but I can imagine them anyhow. Sometimes I’ll become fulfilled with strong emotions by different sentences, e.g. when it says that the father is going to cry, perhaps because I can imagine my own single father. I notice that the weather is shifting in my imagination while reading the text. I also notice some separate words and sentences that causes strong emotions and intense pictures.”

F9’s life, memories and experiences seem to be present at every moment during her reading. F3 compensates the girl’s anonymity by imagining what she looks like and how she is dressed. States of anonymity and melancholy cause affections of powerlessness but also of sympathy: “... I want to get hold of her and force her to shout and cry a bit. I want to take care of her.” F3’s reactions on the anonymity can be connected to the exposition of the girl in third person. This initiates a reaction to continue to create and fulfill the girl, filling in the gaps and senses of emptiness.

Reactions to “Grannar”

Emotional reactions

Emotional reactions to “Grannar” are ‘confusion’, ‘frustration’, ‘discomfort’, ‘irritation’, ‘disgust’, but also ‘tension’ and ‘curiosity’. Emotional reactions also points at the respondents’ valuation of the story. Respondents, who experience tension and curiosity, tend to appreciate it (F1, F5, F7, F8, F11). Respondents, who experience embarrassment and stupid-

ity tend to dislike it (F2, F3, F6). To F2, emotions evidently transforms: "My reactions and feelings of insight increase in time of the man's actions, from astonishment to irritation and disgust [...] from disgust to tension.[...] Emotionally I become nervously intoxicated ... don't know if it is OK to feel like that." A third group of respondents do not express valuation of the story, as they seem to keep a balance between positive and negative emotions (M1, F10, F12, F13).

Aesthetic reactions

Aesthetic reactions focus on the dialogue and the simple language of the story. This seemed to arouse curiosity or repulsion. Some respondents find the story surrealistic (F4, F8). M4 expresses his reaction like this:

"The text gives a kind of strange feeling, as if the impression from the eyes collides with the impression from the sense. I feel lost, a bit uncertain of what is described, as if it is me getting dirty thoughts by reading the text, though I don't know if it is my construction or maybe really is there within the text."

F13 is aware of the connection between narration and emotions:

"The stylized characters and narration in third person, the smouldered envy and its contrast in the couples' cheerful farewell, plus the power of the key to the house, is probably what gives me a hunch that something devastating and unpleasant is going to happen. Their surnames refer to stones and mills which also contribute to this, I think."

M3 comments are almost exclusively aesthetic:

"Afterwards there is just a tension between the trivial and conventional tone of the story and the gaps, inconsequence and lack of information in the story that interests me. I understand that these characters have depth, but the story-teller doesn't want to give access to it. I also understand that the author's intention is to associate the division between knowledge and ignorance with erotic tension. But I don't resist, I understand that the text is flirting with me, and I accept being seduced."

Associations go to other American literature and movies: M1 and F11 think of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, F13 of stories by Roald Dahl, while F18 and M4 associate to films by David Lynch.

Ethical reactions

The theme of this story, 'envy' or 'discontent with life', is predominate to the ethical reactions of F1, F2, F3, F4, F7 F10, F11, F12, F13, F15, M1, M2. F4 makes analogies to herself:

"I usually look into peoples' bathroom closet; I think that's quite common. If I go to somebody's home and the owner is not there, I usually look around, but it always feels very forbidden. What am I searching for? When I actually find something very private, I always wish I hadn't seen it. I'm worried about being discovered. Did I move something? Does my face show that I have seen something I shouldn't?"

F13 refers the Millers' breaking of social rules to her own life when a friendship went wrong: "... too intimate too soon, or when friendship comes to an end". F15 comments are ethical and subject-oriented throughout. She believes that the Millers have to do something about their feelings of discontent, arguing: "A new job, or join a course, or why not further education. Or they can move, it might help as well."

Self-reflecting reactions

Self-reflecting reactions are less frequent towards "Grannar". F3 admits that she often fantasizes about other peoples' lives, but certifies that she would never break social conventions like the Millers do. F7, on the other hand, recognizes herself in their behavior. Recognition precedes ethical reactions: "These two marriages seem to stand still. For instance, they don't have children. But maybe I see this because of my own personal longing for children." Thereafter her reflections lose contact with its fictional context:

"I am completely uninterested in making career. I can't see any meaning in it. ... Just work and work for some kind of status, neglecting everything that's important in life like family and friends, this is my picture of career.(...)... is there anything more irritating than people who never had any troubles? I often think that people like that have no empathy."

F7's self-reflecting reaction starts with recognition, turns to identification of a crucial issue in her life, ending with ethical conclusion on values in life and among people.

F15's reactions towards both stories show that fiction-reading to her is interaction with characters, themes, topics as if in reality. Her consciousness of the stories as fiction is not prominent; her engagement shows up as answers to ethical issues posited:

“Then I think they did wrong, you don't dig among other peoples' things. It is unpolite and unrespectable which I think one ought to understand, and then you don't take things from other people, it had been different if Bill had borrowed food for example, then he could have told them when they got back and replaced it.”

M1 starts to establish the theme at a psychological level: “The story tells about the irrational sides of human beings... irrationality is drawn when you feel fear, disappointment, and weakness and want to defend yourself.” Then his comments turn to reflections on his own life:

“I look at my friends, one by one, thinking of who could be a potential murderer. And I know the answer. It is the ones who are closest to me. I have seen my friends in such different situations when intelligence, spontaneity, sense, humour, and all kinds of emotions have been jeopardized. That's why I can see what might make my closest friends murderers.”

M1's reactions to “Grannar” are as existential and psychological as his reactions shown towards “Kaninernas himmel”.

Creative reactions

Creative reactions towards “Grannar” are few. F9 states that “Grannar” doesn't arouse as many pictures as “Kaninernas himmel” do. The story doesn't give enough space for her imagination, which affects her appreciation of it. Though the story doesn't go into details, she fills out the characters' clothing, colours, hairstyles, body-shapes with her creativeness. Then she turns to the room:

“...in my imagination I am free to look around, for example into the room. A light brown, wood-

en chest of drawers in shape of stairs with silver knobs, a flowery bedcover, white, long, thin curtains which slowly flatters by the wind from an open window, sun, bird song, a car at distance. Pictures that are not written out, but still are there to vivify the reading experience.”

To F9 the story becomes alive by her creativity. This seems to be constant in her way of reading fiction.

Analysis and theory

According to grounded theory, theory is developed while processing and analyzing data. Grounded theory distinguishes two kinds of theories, actual and formal. Actual theories concern a certain group of people, formal theories relations and connections between phenomena (Hartman 2001, p. 79). Following account starts with actual reactions within the group, then formal and general hypotheses are drawn.

Actual theory: Spread in reactions, subjective and objective, in and in between the stories

Reactions to “Kaninernas himmel” divided by percentage

N=100	
Emotional reactions	24, 0 %
Aesthetical reactions	40, 1%
Ethical reactions	16, 5%
Self-reflecting reactions	11, 7%
Creative reactions	7, 8%

Reactions to “Grannar” divided by percentage

N=100	
Emotional reactions	17, 7%
Aesthetical reactions	32, 7%
Ethical reactions	35, 9%
Self-reflecting reactions	10, 1%
Creative reactions	3, 6%

Major reactions to “Kaninernas himmel” are emotional and aesthetic, whereas aesthetical and ethical reactions are dominating towards “Grannar”. The amount of self-reflecting reactions are almost equal to both, while creative reactions are more frequent to “Kaninernas himmel” than to “Grannar”.

Formal theory: Connections between variables in gender, age and reading strategy

Formal theory based on actual relations within the group show connections between the variables gender, age and reading strategy. The table shows domination in reading strategy towards “Kaninernas himmel” and “Grannar”.

Respondent	Kaninernas himmel	Grannar	Age	Both
F1	S	O	20	-
F2	S	S	19	S
F3	S	O	20	-
F4	S	S	21	S
F5	S	S	19	S
F6	S/O	O	23	O
F7	S/O	S	24	S
F8	S	O	19	-
F9	S/O	O	21	O
F10	S	S	20	S
F11	S	O	21	-
F12	S	S	20	S
F13	S	S	23	S
F14	S	O	28	-
F15	S	S	23	S
M1	S	S	20	S
M2	O	O	29	O
M3	S	O	28	-
M4	S	O	26	-

*Table 2. Connections between respondent (gender and age) and domination in reading strategy
S= Subjective/close; O= Objective/distanced*

Table 2 shows that 12 out of 19 respondents use the same reading strategy towards both stories. Nine out of 12 apply subjective/close reading strategy while 3 use objective/distanced reading strategy. Seven respondents hold subjective reading strategy towards “Kaninernas himmel” and distance reading strategy towards “Grannar”. Spread over age shows that 9 respondents applies subjective reading strategy towards both stories, 6 of them are 19-21 years old, and 3 are 23-24 years old. Respondents using objective/distanced reading strategy towards both stories are 23, 24 and 29 years old. Spread over gender shows 12 respondents using the same reading strategy

towards both stories are 10 females and 2 males. Ten out of 12 females apply subjective reading strategy, while subjective and objective reading strategies are distributed equal between males.

Hypotheses: Connections between categories and core category

Reality shown in grounded theory, described as categories, characteristics, qualities and connections, is called ‘domain’. Following hypotheses are drawn:

- Choice of reading strategy is initially allocated.
- Analogies to literature occur in both subjective/close and objective/distanced reading strategy.
- Various kinds of using the stories occur: “Kaninernas himmel” can be used for therapy and “Grannar” in group discussions. Both can be used in future professional context like teaching.
- Readers’ approaches tend to be independent of story.
- Certain reading strategies that appear when reading fiction for personal and ethical development are existential or expressive reading, interactive reading and creative reading.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim with this study is to identify young adults’ reactions to two selected short stories and to analyze what categories and characteristics might be found within these categories; further to study what reading strategies in connection to categories and characteristics might show. The approach is explorative, inductive, and based on grounded theory.

The analyses of written comments by 19 respondents show that subjective (close) or objective (distanced) relation to the stories appear in their statements; 12 out of 19 use the same reading strategy towards both stories. Unlike Berntsen & Larsen (1993) and Rosenblatt (2002), the concept of subject/object in this study is related either to self or to the text, which is close to level 1 and 2 in Balling’s model for analyzing reading experiences (2009, pp 158-162). Certain functions and uses of fiction were found (see below).

The study shows a dominance of the subjective reading strategy. All except one (male) respondent pre-

ferred subjective reading strategy towards “Kaninernas himmel”. Further, the study shows no signs of gender-match effect, which underlines Bortolussis, Dixons and Sopčáks (2010) conclusion: “we argue that both men and women react to the texts according to the same psychological processes, and as a consequence react to male and female protagonists in the same way.”

Aesthetical reactions, subjective, objective or both, dominate on the whole toward both stories. This means that the respondents’ reading is not just a matter of comprehension, they also reflect upon the stories as fiction. Personal likings and evaluations were discussed. *Emotional reactions* show up mainly towards “Kaninernas himmel” addressed to the girl’s transfer to self by identification. Some of these reactions are physically experienced and registered (Merleau-Ponty 1942/1962, Kuiken 2008). *Ethical reactions* show up mainly towards “Grannar” as its central theme, envy, seems to affect the respondents. Ethical reactions also show up towards the girl in “Kaninernas himmel” as being deserted by adults. This indicates that desire and ability to observe ethical and psychological dimensions in fiction, although not explicitly expressed, are important to the readers. As Frank Hakemulder stresses: “... it seems that reading literature enhances the quality of ethical reflection. In addition, the involvement in ethical reflection *itself* may improve future reflections.” (2000, p. 24) Emotional reading experiences are also believed to have similar effects like therapeutic ‘as if’ situations in real life (ibid., p. 16). F15’s comments show strong ethical emotions as if to bring answers to questions posited in real life. Her reading strategy is exceeding the text through interactivity. *Self-reflecting reactions*, i.e. connections to self and personal life-experiences, clearly show existential dimensions as shown in comments by M1. Self-reflecting comments are not just initialized by identification with characters or by theme or motives, they might as well be triggered by metaphors. As Miall points out: “... aesthetic and narrative feelings interact to produce metaphors of personal identification that modify self-understanding.” (Miall 2006, p. 44) Existential reactions or approaches to reading literature are catharsian, as feelings evoked during reading interact to modify the reader’s sense of self (ibid.). Existential reactions, like M1’s, show likeness to expressive reading strategy, or ‘expressive enactment’.

ing to Kuiken, Miall and Sikora (2004), expressive enactment is marked by:

“1/ emergence of aesthetic feelings as well as explicit descriptions towards the text; 2/blurred boundaries between self and other, suggestive metaphors of personal identification; and 3/active and interactive modification of an emergent affective theme.” (ibid.)

Creative reactions in this study appear as exceeding the fiction by imagination. Using imagination, F9 makes people and places become alive. If narration gives space for her vivid fantasy, she appreciates the story. According to Wolfgang Iser (1978), gaps in the text are bridged by the interpretation. To F9, personal imaginations brought to her by the text are not interpretative or sense-making. To her, reading is visualizing elements through imagination, as well as other senses like smelling. Creative reading in this way is like synesthesia, brought to the reader by the story (Runco 2007).

Finally it is important to raise questions of whether the prerequisites had any bearing on the results or not. According to this study, subjective/close and personal reading strategy show more spread in categories and dimensions in categories than the objective/distanced reading strategy does. Collected material based on written comments was initiated by simple instructions with few key-words. The settings, like a relaxed and open meeting with the text, a physical and mental space surrounding the act of reading, seem to have had some influence. Kuiken (2008) points out that:

“... literary readers who have been given instructions supporting covert creation of a quiet and protected “space” for reflection are more likely to report (1) resonance of their own feelings with those expressed in the text, (2) an objective impression of the feelings expressed in the text, and (3) an experiential shift through which they carried forward feelings expressed they had usually ignored.” (p. 54)

Readers’ reactions like the ones shown above will most probably appear if the spatial conditions, physical as well as mental, are at hand. Sociologist Margaret S. Archer (2003) argues that self-knowledge develops through internal conversation, where the

relations subject/object can be transferred to fiction-reading and reading strategy as mentioned above. Literature can be used as a mirror to the reader, an interlocutor to self, and as shown in this study a place to exceed into increased self-knowledge, transferred by existential/expressive, interactive or creative reading.

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