

Abstract

Jenny Bergenmar: *Hearts Run Wild: The Aesthetics of Life and the Ethics of Narration in Selma Lagerlöf's Gösta Berlings saga*. ISBN 91-7139-604-7. Dissertation in Swedish with an English Summary, 237 p. Department of Literature, Göteborg University, Sweden, 2003

On its publication, in 1891, Selma Lagerlöf's first novel, *Gösta Berlings saga*, was looked upon as a "curious" book. Some critics hailed in it the work of an innovator; others spoke of it as a failure. The dispute over its status as a work of art calls for an exploration of its relation to the philosophic and aesthetic currents of its time. The study focuses on the fictional conflict between an ethical and an aesthetic attitude to life arising from the overthrow of traditional social values, but also aims at clarifying the ethical aspects involved in the narrative act. Consequently, *what* the text has to say about ethics, and *how* it speaks to the reader is of equal interest. The exploration is guided by two main questions: What views of reality and what existential conditions are the consequences of the loss of value in modernity, according to the novel? How does the author communicate with the reader through her choice of composition, narrator, style, and intertextuality?

In chapter 1, the theoretical starting-points of the dissertation are presented. The analysis of the links to Heidenstam and the new aesthetics of the Swedish 1890s, to the decadence movement, and to Nietzschean currents undertaken in chapter 2, further highlights the novel's aesthetic understanding of life and demonstrates Lagerlöf's breach of gendered reader expectations. Chapter 3 argues that the novel's narrative structure, characterized by dramatic reversals, corresponds to the insecure living conditions in the fictional world and, at the same time, fills a communicative function for the reader. The narrator's concern for reader communication and her understanding of the fictional characters' inner world are examined in chapter 4. A tension is set up between a mode of writing associated both with the oral tradition and femininity and a modern, narrative technique.

The theme of modernization is explored in chapter 5 and found to be reflected in its dialogue with two texts canonized in its age, Goethe's *Faust* and Mme de Staël's *Corinne*. *Gösta Berlings saga* carries on the debate about the positions of men and women in modernity, but does so in terms of the scope for freedom, knowledge, and individual needs. In its discussion of the novel's resolution, chapter 6 deals with the growing opposition between an aesthetic attitude to life, related both to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and an ethical attitude, spiritually allied to Lutheranism and moral Utopian ideas of the concluding nineteenth century. The dissertation ends in a discussion of the text as an ethical encounter, both between the fictional characters and between reader and text.

Keywords: Selma Lagerlöf, *Gösta Berlings saga*, 1890s, aesthetics, ethics, modernity, literary tradition, avant-garde, erotic love, narration, gender studies, epistemology

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