

“The one part of ourselves we’ve only talked around”
*Sexual depictions in lesbian young adult literature and their role in classroom
settings*



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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore what previous research suggests about how thematic variations in sexual depictions in young adult novels with lesbian characters can affect readers. Furthermore, it explores how different kinds of sexual depictions in lesbian young adult novels can be utilized in a classroom setting. Through close readings of four lesbian sexual depictions in young adult novels, these ideas are exemplified and further discussed. The four chosen novels are Nancy Garden's *Annie on my mind*, Sarah McCarry's *About a girl*, Julie Anne Peters's *Keeping you a secret* and Sara Farizan's *Tell me again how a crush should feel*. Relevant suggestions and claims of previous researchers is interwoven with aims from the Swedish syllabus for the English subject, and both serve as framework for the analyses within this essay. This research suggests that the differences in how sexual intimacy in young adult novels are depicted may have many different effects on young readers. Some thematic variations may be better suited for classroom settings. Furthermore, the research suggests that positive emotions of lesbian main characters is often favorable for young readers, something found in *Annie on my mind* and *Keeping you a secret*. Sexually explicit novels, such as *About a girl*, have been controversial in classroom settings but could also reduce the censorship of lesbian sexuality which has been prevalent in literature. The research suggests that depictions of sexual assault can be beneficial if combined with classroom discussions. Such a depiction is found in *Tell me again how a crush should feel*. Additionally, this research suggests that it is important for teachers to carefully choose lesbian young adult novels and evaluate what the depictions of sexuality within them may convey and to conduct post-discussions with their students if they include such novels within their teaching.

Keywords: young adult literature, sexual depictions, LGBTQ, lesbian representation, curriculum

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Introduction

To engage one's students in reading young adult literature has shown to have numerous benefits. Because of their general condensed nature and their use of adolescent characters as vehicles to discuss social issues, young adult novels have proved a time-efficient tool for teachers aiming to engage their students in reading while at the same time providing perspective on topical social issues (Clark & Martino, 2016; Santoli & Wagner, 2004; Louie & Louie, 1992). However, teachers might need tools helping them to decide which young adult novels to choose to best accommodate these advantages. In relation to this, Wickens (2007) claims that adults generally struggle with finding appropriate tools to discuss the social issues of sexuality and sexual desire together with adolescents. Furthermore, she writes that there exists a notion that knowledge and discussions regarding certain social issues, as for example sexuality, should be restricted from adolescents. This restriction of knowledge can, according to Wickens, become a regulation of power. Furthermore, this eventual restriction of power stands in contrast to the Swedish syllabus for upper secondary school, which states that it is important that students engage in discussions about social issues (Skolverket, 2011). Considering these claims, one could hypothesize that there exists a need, as well as expectations, to address sexuality with adolescents, that is not always catered to in classroom environments.

Wimark (2009) argues that the Swedish school environment reproduces heterosexual norms, often by dividing girls and boys in the classroom, based on the assumption that the one gender is attracted to the other. Furthermore, he writes that the Swedish school system would benefit from an ideology based in the knowledge that not all people are heterosexual and having this ideology reflected within the curriculum (Wimark, 2009). This suggests that the ideas presented within the syllabus regarding the importance of discussions about social issues are not often catered to.

Including gay and lesbian themed texts in one's curriculum might therefore be beneficial, not only to prevent a proprietorship of the power of knowledge by adults, but also since an inclusion of such literature will allow students to see people like themselves or their families and peers reflected in literature. Furthermore, reading about gay and lesbian identities may give people who are not gay or lesbian "a greater understanding of the conflicts of these young people so that they might intercede and advocate for GLBTQ youth in their stead" (Wickens, 2007, p. 333). A greater understanding of these conflicts could also be gained by reading about gay and lesbian relationships. However, reading about gay and lesbian identities and relationships in few, specific and isolated instances is problematic. This might enhance the notion that homosexuality is an anomaly, an exception to be dealt with as a theme and not naturally occurring within the courses (Blackburn & Chey, 2017). This might also be true for the inclusion of sexuality within literature.

However, it is important to consider that themes within these novels and how they vary have different consequences for readers. One of these themes is indeed the depictions of intimacy, lust and sex within young adult novels, which vary greatly and might convey a number of ideas and conclusions (O'Bannion, 2010). Therefore, it might not be sufficient to merely provide one's students with a number of novels where themes of homosexuality and sexuality is addressed without conducting post-discussions or considering in which ways these themes are presented in the texts.

Additionally, Carlson and Linville (2014) argue that teachers often entertain a dated view on classroom discussions about homosexuality and choose homosexually themed novels that convey problematic conventions about gay people. Furthermore, they stress the importance of depictions of sexual intimacy and desire within gay and lesbian YA, arguing that when portrayed as something the characters do willfully and with genuine affection, they have the ability to debunk myths regarding homosexuality.

Through analyses of sexual depictions in lesbian young adult literature I hope to elucidate possible effects, advantages and disadvantages with reading lesbian themed young adult novels that contain sexual relationships as an adolescent. This research also explores whether thematic variations within these sexual depictions can be particularly important for teachers to consider when including lesbian young adult texts in a classroom setting. Furthermore, the analyses of the sexual depictions will be conducted through lenses of relevant previous research on young adult literature, lesbian literature and sexual depictions, particularly those within young adult texts. The sexual depictions analyzed within this research are excerpts from Nancy Garden's *Annie on my mind*, Sarah McCarry's *About a girl*, Julie Anne Peters's *Keeping you a secret* and Sara Farizan's *Tell me again how a crush should feel*.

This study was conducted with a basis in the idea that there exists a need to let adolescents engage in discussions regarding sexuality, as well as suggestions within previous research that there are numerous benefits from reading about positive lesbian relationships. Additionally, this study was conducted with the ambition to encourage teachers to be more aware of these factors. Because of the relevance of previous research which focused specifically on lesbian themed novels rather than all LGBTQ-themed ones, this research is limited to lesbian themed texts.

In addition to this, a few aims and goals within the Swedish syllabus for the English subject in upper secondary school serves as guidelines to further give this research a tangible aim as well as a reference frame. The inclusion of discussions about this essay project's topic in relation to the English subject in Swedish upper secondary school serves to exemplify an environment in which the suggestions within this research could be relevant. Basing the project within the framework of the Swedish school system might present explicit examples

of how ideas and suggestions within this research might present themselves, be utilized or affect a classroom setting. Additionally, the English subject's syllabus offers additional tools with which to analyze the texts as I can explore connections and differences between what previous research suggest about the inclusion of lesbian themed texts within classroom settings and goals and aims within the syllabus. The relevant passages of the syllabus are presented in the background section of this essay, and are harkened back to in other sections within this essay. This is done to make the ideas presented within this research more tangible and to connect them further to relevant educational environments.

During the search for previous studies as pre-work for this project essay, no other research on the specific topic of lesbian sexual depictions within young adult novels was found. Nevertheless, previous studies on young adult literature, sexual depictions and LGBTQ representation within literature, especially directed towards adolescents, offered a fruitful basis when conducting this research, in addition to the aims of the Swedish syllabus for English.

Background

The Swedish syllabus for English

One of the aims of the English subject in Swedish schools is that teachers should provide students with the opportunity to enhance their capacity “to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used.” (Skolverket, 2011). Additionally, the syllabus states that core content for English 6 as well as English 7 should include: “How language, picture and sound are used to express influence in such areas as political debate” (Skolverket, 2011). Partaking in the subject of English in Swedish schools should give students the opportunities to develop the following: “Theoretical and complex subject areas [...] (of) societal issues and working life ; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; cultural expressions in modern times and historically, such as literary periods.” as well as “Strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to understand implied meaning.” (Skolverket, 2011).

Young adult fiction

The term young adult fiction, often abbreviated as YA, as it will be in this essay, can be defined as literature written for, and marketed towards, adolescents. This has more or less been the consistent viewpoint since the term emerged, which is believed to be in the 1930s or 1940s. In the 1960s, the term spread and came to define fiction written for young people at the ages of 12 to 18. These novels and texts often included realistic themes, often focusing on contemporary societal issues (Cart, 2008).

Although many people question if YA literature should be considered a genre, Roman Trušník (2009) states that young adult literature at the very least “constitutes an independent category, with its own characteristics, features, and development” (p.167). Moreover, he

writes that YA literature often distinguishes itself by including didactic elements. Trušník argues that authors of such literature sometimes want the young readers to learn something through reading about the social issues within their novels, especially authors of novels with homosexual themes. These phenomena of explicit didacticism within these types of texts may be one of the reasons why teachers often include YA within their curriculum (Trušník, 2009). In addition to this, Wickens (2007) writes that modern gay and lesbian young adult fiction often utilizes a similar didactic approach to convey positive ideas regarding homosexual identities (Wickens, 2007). However, some teachers are still hesitant to include YA in their curriculum because they believe that it holds less value than reading novels considered canonical classics and that these are more useful with regards to learning about societal values, identity as well as literary terminology. These theories have however been tested and it is now believed that there are no advantages with reading canonical classics which teachers cannot achieve with YA except from preserving the recognized canonical classics (Santoli & Wagner, 2004).

Sexual depictions in young adult fiction

In research done by Callister, Coyne, Stern, Stockdale, Miller and Wells (2012) on sexual content in 40 young adult books, they found that there are typically two kinds of depictions of sexual activity in YA. Furthermore, the division of these is fairly equal. Sexual activity is, according to Callister et.al, either implied or described. Implied depictions refer to depictions in which the narrator expresses that a sexual activity has taken, or takes place, but does not describe the activity per se more than by one or a few sentences. The other category of depictions contains descriptive sexual activity, in different degrees of sexual explicitness. In these depictions the acts or the activity, be it passionate kissing or intercourse, are explicitly stated (Callister et. al, 2012). The distinction between these could be a determining factor for teachers choosing YA literature for their students since the willingness to include

descriptive sexual depictions may vary as well as the ability to approach possible discussions surrounding whether or not descriptive sexual depictions are appropriate (O'Bannion, 2010).

Which degree of explicitness of sexual content in YA texts should be allowed within pedagogical contexts has been, and continues to be, a controversial topic. Many schools and teachers encounter backlash from parents when including sexual content that can be considered explicit (O'Bannion, 2010). Furthermore, there is an issue with how this should be measured. Whether or not a sexual depiction is considered explicit is a matter of opinion and different readers may have varied views about the degree of explicitness within a text. Nevertheless, this does not mean that sexual content deemed explicit should be banned and cannot be utilized within a school environment. However, it might be relevant for a teacher to consider whether or not they feel comfortable with dealing with sexually explicit content within texts used in their classroom, as well as potential controversy surrounding their choice of literature (O'Bannion, 2010).

YA and lesbian representation

It is relevant to ask why lesbian representation within literature can be influential for the reader, and what this means for the teaching profession. Surmise that a teacher has a thousand students in their classes. Statistically, approximately a hundred of these students will not be heterosexual, and this does not include unrecorded numbers (Savage, 2004). This might call for careful consideration when questioning how to cater to the inclusion of representation of all students one teaches.

Meredith Miller states that "It is in literature, as much as in bars or schools, that women describe, again and again, the process of developing a lesbian identity." (Miller, 2006, p.49). She elaborates on this idea, writing that the importance of coming to terms and exploring one's identity through literature have been such an essential topic within the lesbian

community so that lesbian themed literature has been labelled “survival literature” by prolific lesbian archivists and authors (Miller, 2006).

The idea that reading is a beneficial tool for students to gain information about lesbian identities and acquire empathy towards lesbians as a minority is further proposed in research conducted by Jenkins (1993). By mapping out a large number of ways in which lesbian and gay characters differ from each other in race, class, engagement in romantic encounters and relationships, appearance and storylines, she illuminates the importance of considering carefully the effects of the variations of content within a novel that deals with the social topic of homosexuality. In addition to this, she notes that themes of desire and intimacy in lesbian books directed towards adolescents have increased. This might suggest a stereotypical de-sexualisation of lesbians in literature (Jenkins, 1993).

Louie and Louie (1992) conducted an experiment where they sought out to find in which ways young adult literature can empower adolescents. They offered a group of students a list of novels within which they found that the story included a character who was faced with a certain societal issue and was able to overcome this. The students proceeded to choose a novel and were asked to write a log about what aspects of the characters they liked, what goals and feelings the main character has, how the characters goals and motivations helped them overcome the obstacles and if they could find aspects within the story to help them succeed in the same ways as the main character does. After reading the logs and conducting discussions with the students, the researchers concluded that a majority of the students felt that the novel they chose included some aspects they could identify with and some students expressed that they had gained beneficial tools to guide them within their own struggles or struggles they might face. Some students expressed that they could relate to the characters in a positive manner. (Louie & Louie, 1992).

Taking the ideas of Miller into account, as well as the claims by Louie and Louie, one can assume that young lesbian readers would benefit from reading about lesbian characters with positive experiences. Nonetheless, a majority of students who identify themselves within the LGBTQ-spectra in the US claimed their experiences with engaging in reading homosexual literature and conducting discussions about important historical LGBTQ events in a school environment had all been negative (Blackburn & Clark, 2017). Although this research was conducted on schools within the US, Anderson (2011) states that a lot of teachers in Sweden say that the subject of discussing homosexuality in Swedish classroom is a controversial one, which many still struggle with how to address. Further, he suggests that it might be problematic that there is a lack of discussion regarding homosexuality in core subjects, and that when Swedish teachers discuss these topics with their students, they often do so in health class or outside of the classroom. He suggests that this might be part of the reason why teachers do not approach this subject matter naturally (Anderson, 2011). This suggests further a need to find a way to include discussions about homosexuality in the English subject in Swedish schools.

Method

Selection process

When searching for depictions, it was decided upon that a large number of lesbian themed young adult novels would be collected and then skimmed through to find indications of romantic relationships between female characters. The process of collecting the lesbian themed novels had a number of stages. Firstly, I went to a local library where there is a specific department dedicated to young adult fiction. Within this department there exists a section with young adult novels with LGBTQ-storylines. With the help of a librarian who was consulted, the synopses of the entire collection of LGBTQ novels were skimmed through to rule out novels containing relationships between characters who were not defined as girls or young women. After this, I asked for further recommendations on the online discussion forum on Goodreads. The suggestions which had not previously been ruled out or already attained was searched for on Scribd. After skimming through these newly found novels and ruling out some of them, a total of 26 novels were collected. All of these were once again skimmed through to find suggestions of sexual relationships, intimacy between two female characters and expressions of lustful feelings. After this stage, 15 novels remained. After conducting a close reading on one sexual depiction within all these, it was found that some of the novels had similar storylines and plot points. Therefore, the ones with less substantial sexual depictions were ruled out. Once again, all novels were briefly read through until a varied selection of novels remained. At this stage, seven novels remained and a close reading was conducted on all of them. The four depictions which were chosen in the end displayed a variation of combinations of the thematic categorizations.

Close reading as a method

There are no determined directives to close reading, rather it ineluctably becomes an inductive, self-developed method where the system is constructed by the researcher or reader conducting the analysis. This approach, in combination with ideas presented in Johnny Saldaña's (2016) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, served as a guideline when conducting my analyses. This will be further explained under the heading *Categorizing* stated below. Other relevant details such as the character's general attitudes towards sex, an idea of the quantity of sexual depictions within chosen novels and ideas within the novel that may in different ways relate to this research will also be presented within the analyses. Moreover, to conclude whether or not the emotions during and surrounding the sexual acts of the characters are positive or negative, other sections of the novels have been closely read and analysed and might in some instances be presented within the following analyses to exemplify and strengthen possible claims made. To only read the passages presented below in the *Close readings and analyses* section may not provide this research with the relevant suggestions or accurate analyses. It is relevant to clarify that *all* novels from which following sexual depictions are gathered have been read several times during this research, and not only the depictions themselves. Complete examples or excerpts from the chosen depictions will be provided and preceded by an analysis. Furthermore, it is important to note that since these are analyses of fictional literature, they will be largely subjective as well as influenced by the researcher.

Connections with the Swedish syllabus for English

When studying previous research a clear connection between previously mentioned ideas about using young adult literature as a way to discuss societal issues and identity and the content within the Swedish syllabus of English became apparent. The syllabus encourages teachers to not only engage students in content-oriented tasks and discussions, i.e. related to vocabulary, syntax and grammar, but also about identity and societal issues (Skolverket, 2011). Because this research will hark back to, and is largely dependent on, ideas about which ways adolescents can be affected by, or utilize, the texts analysed within this research, suggesting in which ways this could be exemplified within the Swedish classroom was deemed beneficial. Thus, in instances, this will be discussed within the analyses.

Categorizing

Based on the research stated in the background section, three thematic categories were determined, thus mimicking the method of a coding scheme (Saldaña, 2016). However, a deductive and explicit coding scheme was deemed irrelevant to the aims of this research, and a close reading where themes were explored proved more beneficial. It is important to note that the following categories are largely constructed based on the subjective ideas and interpretations of previous researcher's categorizations. The thematic categories which served as a basis for choosing how to analyse the depictions were:

Negative/positive emotions: Which emotions do the characters inhabit during and regarding the sexual act taking place in the depiction?

Descriptive/IMPLIED: Do the reader get to follow the sexual act depicted as it takes place or is it implied, hinted at or does the narrator simply express that a sexual act has taken place?

(Callister et. al, 2012). In this research, depictions that are implied or stated to have taken

place, but are not described within the text are categorised as implied, while all depictions where some or all details of it are described are categorised as descriptive.

Explicit/non-explicit: This category is an elaboration on the descriptive/implied category. In the following analyses, a depiction that includes touching of erogenous zones (including heavy petting) and/or oral sex where these elements are clearly stated, will be categorized as explicit, and all others will be non-explicit. To clarify, a descriptive depiction does not have to be explicit, depending on the nature of the sexual acts depicted.

Basis for thematic categorisation

Many believe that there are benefits to young people reading uplifting storylines, whether or not they include arduous real-life issues. An uplifting storyline may diminish the risk of the young reader losing interest and might provide them with better confidence, if they experience relatability with the text or characters (Louie & Louie, 1992). Moreover, for a long time, a majority of lesbian themed literature portrayed unsympathetic characters or included dire storylines where the relationships ended in tragedy (Wickens, 2007). As argued by Carlson and Lindville (2014), the emotions of the characters displaying intimacy within a novel are relevant for the sexual depictions ability to function as a tool to undermine harmful stereotypes of gay characters (Carlson & Lindville, 2014). To cater to the ideas within these claims, as well as the argument that there is empathy and relatability to be gained by reading about positive lesbian experiences, this research set out to illuminate the ways in which positive or negative emotions within sexual depictions are portrayed.

Exploring whether or not a depiction is explicit or non-explicit was considered relevant to this research since the stigma of LGBTQ literature has led to an extensive censoring of gay and lesbian texts. It should be noted, that this is referring to a censorship where books are refused, banned and not bought by schools, book stores, publishers and

libraries rather than censorship where texts are rewritten by others than the original author (Wickens, 2007). These acts of censorship may have led to a lack of variation within sexual depictions in lesbian literature, narrower than within heterosexually themed literature. Furthermore, seeing as there are more heterosexual romances portrayed within fiction than lesbian, sexual depictions within lesbian literature might have a much smaller allotment of explicit nature than its' heterosexual counterpart. O'Bannion (2010) describes how an explicit nature of sexual depictions within YA used in school environments may cause controversy that the pedagogue will have to approach. Highlighting that explicitness is a variation to consider, as well as how these variations may manifest themselves, was therefore considered admissible for this research. In contrast to this, Bott (2006) argues that when written with intention to raise important questions for the reader, explicit sexual depictions can serve to engage students in important discussions regarding morality and ethics.

In addition to this, the topic of consent is discussed briefly within this research. Regarding the issue of reading novels containing rape and sexual assault in in a classroom environment Bott (2006) states that "...many of our teens do not find themselves in the pages of the curriculum we are contracted to use." (Bott, 2006 p.1). She therefore suggests that reading about rape or sexual assault can offer adolescents feelings of representation and reconnaissance. In relation to this, studies suggest that reading about sexual assault and rape in a classroom setting have proved beneficial for conducting fruitful discussions as well as debunking harmful myths regarding these social issues (Cleveland & Durand, 2014; Malo-Juvera, 2012).

Close readings

Within the analyses of the following sexual depictions, implications and discussions regarding whether or not these novels may or may not be useful, harmful, beneficial or problematic to utilize in a classroom setting will occur. However, it is “imperative that educators evaluate YA texts in terms of their accuracy and implicit messages on such issues.” (Cleveland & Durand, 2014). To clarify, previous research suggests that although some conclusions or suggestions can be drawn from conducting analyses on YA literature, the teacher will ultimately subjectively analyse the themes and motifs within these sexual depictions and their novels if they choose to include them in their curriculum. As stated in the introduction, these close readings and the ideas drawn from them, serves to illuminate *possible* advantages and disadvantages with utilizing them in a classroom setting. However, ultimately, it is up to each individual educator to evaluate the texts to bring into their classroom (Cleveland & Durand, 2014). Hopefully, new perspective about lesbian YA and its relation to education will be gained from reading this essay, when conducting said evaluation.

Nancy Garden - *Annie on my mind*

“I remember so much about that first time with Annie that I am numb with it, and breathless. I can feel Annie’s hands touching me again, gently, as if she were afraid I might break; I can feel her softness under my hands-I look down at my hands now and see them slightly curved, feel them become both strong and gentle as I felt them become for the first time. I can close my eyes and feel every motion of Annie’s body and my own-clumsy and hesitant and shy-but that isn’t the important part. The important part is the wonder of the closeness...” (p.146)

The theme of sex in *Annie on my mind* is prominent within the storyline. The characters of Liza and Annie are hesitant to be sexually intimate, suggested in a number of

passages leading up to the depiction stated above. The character Liza, who serves as both first-person narrator and main character in *Annie on my mind*, experiences strong lustful feelings when thinking about Annie and expresses fear and shame about this (p. 143). However, they engage in a conversation about their hesitation towards sexual intimacy, and look to literature to help them cope with their struggles. During this part of the novel Liza expresses: “I felt as I were meeting parts of myself in the gay people I read about. Gradually, I began to feel calmer inside...” and “I did read the book, and Annie reread it, and it helped us discuss the one part of ourselves we’d only talked around...” (p. 144). These passages are particularly relevant to this essay, because they, despite being fictional, harks back to ideas presented in this research project, namely, those of possible connections between identity, sexuality and literature.

Liza, uses positively charged words when describing the sexual experience, such as wonder, gently, strong and breathless. Therefore, this particular depiction is classified as one with positive emotions. Furthermore, she expresses how this particular occurrence is important to her. Liza’s positive emotions regarding her sexual relationship with Annie remains positive throughout the novel. Taking Louie & Louie’s suggestions that a positive storyline surrounding a character that adolescents can relate to leads to beneficial reading experiences (Louie & Louie, 1992). Positive depictions as those found in *Annie on my mind* where the lesbian character finds the intimacy to be a positive experience, can be beneficial to include in one’s curriculum as a teacher.

In addition to this, the Swedish syllabus for English states that all pupils should encounter texts with which they can relate to personally. Bott (2006) acknowledges the importance of this idea, and adds that the need for representation, emphasized further by Miller (2006), should be applied to sexual depictions within YA literature as well. Because of the varied nature of, and detailed discussions regarding sexual intimacy within *Annie on my*

mind, the chance of an adolescent reader finding representation through the sexual themes in the narrative, increases.

Details of what kind of sexual activity is taking place is largely left out in all instances of sexual depictions within *Annie on my mind*, as is the case of this particular depiction. It is up to the reader to interpret what kind of intimate action the characters are performing. Despite the fact that Liza mentions touching, since the nature of the touching is not revealed and few further details are revealed, this depiction must be classified as non-explicit. Furthermore, it falls under the descriptive category, as we follow events within the sexual depiction as they progress, rather than receiving information that a sexual act has taken place through a simple sentence (Callister et. al, 2012).

Wickens (2007) suggests that young people may have been excluded from discussions regarding lesbian and gay sexuality because of the stigma surrounding these topics, and the nature of the depictions within *Annie on my mind* may be helpful when dealing with such discussions. Firstly, an explicit discussion regarding ways to communicate and deal with sexuality is present within the text, where Liza and Annie talk about their fears surrounding intimacy and they solve their issues in a constructive manner by reading books with sexual topics together. Furthermore, the descriptive manner in which the depiction is written suggests that the author did not want to censor the sexuality of the character. Wickens (2007) mentions further, that storyline and characters within *Annie on my mind* was uncommonly sympathetic for their time, but marks a sort of starting points for these less problematic portrayals of gay and lesbian people.

Sarah McCarry - *About a girl*

“I kissed her hard and she kissed me back harder, hungry, her thigh wedged between my legs, her fingers undoing the buttons of my jeans. She bit my lip with her sharp little teeth, so hard I tasted blood, and I yanked her hair. She worked her hand into my jeans and shoved her fingers inside of me...”(McCarry, pp. 169-170)

This depiction is one of eight between the characters Tally and Maddy, rendering this novel as the novel with the highest quantity of sexual depictions of all novels read within this research. Tally functions as main character and narrator throughout the novel, and expresses many times how distant Maddy is. Maddy is a relatively passive character, whose thoughts and feelings neither Tally nor the reader gets much insight to. This causes frustration for Tally, who expresses deep feelings towards Maddy, who rarely verbally expresses any positive emotions towards her, but rather an aloofness and seems to have a history of hurting people. Maddy might therefore be seen as an unsympathetic character. Further, because of the combination of this characters disinterest in expressing emotions as well as her being described as a cold, promiscuous characters with tendencies to be sexually forceful, it can be argued that this reproduces certain stereotypes, among them, the sexually predatory homosexual (Barnes-Brus, 2005). In addition to this, the relationship between Tally and Maddy is not conveyed as a communicative, healthy relationship and moreover, this relationship does not last until the end of the novel. Wickens (2007), as well as Louie and Louie (1992) expresses that these types of storylines might not be beneficial for encouraging adolescents to gain understanding towards gay or lesbian identities or feelings of positive representations for lesbian readers, as well as young readers in general. It might be beneficial for teachers to address the nature of Tally’s and Maddy’s relationship, and perhaps discuss the stereotype that the character of Maddy might portray, i.e. the sexually predatory homosexual.

Another indication of why this particular depiction might be difficult for teachers to work with is its explicit nature. As previously stated within this essay, books with explicit content are often challenged and sometimes deemed problematic to work with (O'Bannion, 2010). The nature of the sexual act within this passage may be perceived as somewhat forceful, since Tally expresses how Maddy "shoves" her fingers inside of her, as well as bites her. One can surmise that if a sexually explicit depiction can be enough to render controversy, one containing blood and force may call for a teacher to consider preparing to carefully discuss such a segment.

Since this is a depiction where the reader follows the progressions of events within the sexual acts, this was considered a descriptive sexual depiction. However, categorizing the emotions of the characters became a challenge due to the complexity of the relationship. Within this depiction, all emotions expressed are almost exclusively physical ones (pp. 169-170). However, regarding their relationship as a whole, the reader receives little to no information regarding what the character of Maddy feels.

Tally struggles internally throughout the text with her feelings towards Maddy and their relationship. Throughout the novel, Tally experiences macabre visions of Maddy covered in blood, often slaughtering animals which makes her terrified and nauseated. This images often appear after passages where they have had sexual relations. During their time together, Tally experiences a loss of time and memory and struggles to recall her home and friends. Acknowledging the ideas of Carlsson and Lindville (2014) that intimacy between gay and lesbian characters benefits from positive storylines, as well as the ideas that overall positive representations of lesbian characters and relationships are favorable for young readers (Jenkins, 1993; Louie & Louie, 1992; Miller, 2006), one may surmise that it requires a lot of careful preparation from a teacher's part, before providing one's students with a text such as *About a girl*. However, arguments can be made for doing so, and utilizing the complexity

within the text with the intention of discussing the topic issues (Trušník, 2009; Wickens, 2007). According to Madsen (2013) a natural hierarchy where one person has power over the other will naturally occur within all sexual relationships. She argues further, that this hierarchy is complex and should not be understood as something inherently problematic nor positive. Because there are many benefits with discussing sex and sexuality within adolescent (Jenkins, 1993; Louie & Louie, 1992; Miller, 2006), perhaps an accurate portrayal of the complexity within sexual relationships is worth discussing. However, this can, of course, be seen as an immensely large task to take on as a language teacher. Even so, Madsen's ideas are worth mentioning since it might be unfair to dismiss the complexity of the sexual relationship in *About a girl* as simply problematic.

Julie Anne Peters - *Keeping you a secret*

“We gazed up into the cracked and blistered ceiling. Facing her, I said, ‘You want to try it out?’

A slow smile snaked across her lips. ‘I thought you’d never ask.’” (Peters, 2003, p. 203)

This is a non-explicit, implicit depiction with positive emotions. *Keeping you a secret* does not include any other sexual depictions than few instances where the characters imply that they have engaged in sexual intimacy with each other. Furthermore, this passage is never developed upon and is not preceded by any implication that the characters inhabit interests in having a sexually intimate relationship with each other. In contrast to this, main character Holland, one of the two characters in this depiction, has a sexual relationship with a boy which is more developed upon in *Keeping you a secret* than her lesbian relationship with the character Cece. However, Hollands' heterosexual relationship does not take up a large portion of the novel. Nevertheless, the sexual intimacy within this relationship is developed upon and the main character's thoughts related to it is explored. It is possible to link this with

Wickens (2007) ideas that gay sexual intimacy has been censored in literature. It is relevant to question whether this novel would be problematic to include in one's curriculum as a teacher. If one includes *Keeping you a secret* in one's curriculum to cater to students' feelings of representation, it might be beneficial to note that it lacks any discussions regarding the characters' feelings regarding their sexual relationship. Such discussions are, as previously mentioned, beneficial for reducing stereotypes, as well as catering for this need for representation (Carlson & Lindville, 2014).

Arguments could, however, be made for wanting to reduce the sexual depictions and discussions about sex in a lesbian themed YA novel and including such a novel in one's curriculum. Firstly, it diminishes all risk of reproducing the stereotype of the over-sexed homosexual (Barnes-Brus, 2005). In addition to this, the risk of causing controversy, as O'Bannion (2010) expresses is a risk-factor when presenting students with texts that include sexual depiction, is also avoided.

However, both these arguments might lose merit when considering that heterosexual sexual depictions appear in the novel. Since a general de-sexualisation of lesbian characters has occurred in fiction, *Keeping you a secret* may appear problematic to use when wishing to cater to the need for lesbian representation and thus, the debunking of problematic homosexual stereotypes (Barnes-Brus, 2005; Jenkins, 1993).

Skolverket (2011) lists representation and inclusion of discussions about societal issues as aims in the English subject in Swedish schools. Peters' novel does indeed explicitly deal with the of subject coming out in your adolescence and does so without a tragic ending for gay characters, which can be problematic and destructive (Louie & Louie, 1992; Wickens, 2007). However, the social issue of non-normative sexual desires is perhaps not properly addressed within *Keeping you a secret*.

Sara Farizan - *Tell me again how a crush should feel*

“She inches closer again and grabs at my hips. In spite of myself, it feels good and a part of me wants to give in. [...] [She] lunges forward aggressively and bites my lower lip.

‘Stop!’ I force her off me. She crashes into the wall behind her. I’m not sure what is happening, but she eyes me like a feral animal. [...]

‘Isn’t this what you wanted?’ Saskia asks in a sultry voice.

‘Saskia, you hurt me.’ I look for any sort of sympathy in her expression. ‘Do you understand that?’ Nothing. ‘I don’t... This isn’t what I want.’ [...]

Saskia gets close to my face again and caresses my cheek. ‘No one is done with me until I am done with them. Do *you* understand?’” (Farizan, 2014, p. 220).

Although this depiction is non-explicit, it may be considered indecorous or hard to read for some. This is a descriptive depiction of a non-consensual act rendering the main character, who is subject to this act, to feel negative emotions.

Although a difficult subject matter for many to discuss, there are benefits with reading young adult fiction dealing with rape and sexual assault. Firstly, these are social issues, something that has been considered an important part to include in classroom settings, including the Swedish English subject classroom (Skolverket, 2011). One additional benefit is indeed that “reading a young adult novel in conjunction with a reader response based instructional unit can be effectively used to reduce rape myth acceptance in adolescents” (Malo-Juvera, 2012, p. 136). However, as previously mentioned, introducing a text that includes a non-consensual sexual act should be done with careful consideration and appropriate discussion, as is always the case with difficult subjects (Barnes-Brus, 2005; Cleveland & Durand, 2014). As is also mentioned within the quote by Malo-Juvera (2012), to

enhance the possibility that the outcome is positive when engaging students in YA texts containing sexual assault or rape, one needs additional assignments or post-discussions.

Additional reason to conduct thorough discussion about a depiction that includes a non-consensual sexual act between two characters of the same sex is to diminish the risk of reproducing the stereotype of the over-sexed, or sexually predatory homosexual by emphasizing that this is a stereotype (Barnes-Brus, 2005). However, as the character of Saskia is not an openly homosexual character who does have relationships with male characters, this might not be considered an issue if presenting *Tell me again how a crush should feel* in a classroom setting. Even so, one could surmise from Barnes-Brus' (2005) as well as Carlson and Lindville's (2014) claims that there are many harmful stereotypes attributed to lesbian people, that a knowledge about lesbian stereotypes is beneficial. Subsequently carrying out discussions regarding these stereotypes might aid teachers in catering to the need for lesbian students to feel rightfully represented when reading young adult text with lesbian characters.

Conclusion

As previous research suggested, the thematic variations within sexual depictions in lesbian young adult novels matter greatly to the reader. However, it is impossible to state conclusively that a certain theme within sexual depiction will have a certain impact on the reader. It is vital to note that the thematic variations will intersect and subsequently impinge upon one another. Even though studies and researchers suggest that if a character within a text experiences struggle with their identity but eventually possesses positive emotions as they resolve their issues within a narrative is beneficial for a young reader, it does not mean that this text is without problematic elements regarding depictions of sexuality. The same text may convey harmful stereotypes about lesbian people or lesbian sexuality, be uncomfortably graphic for teachers or convey an idea that lesbian sexuality should be censored.

As stated in this research, Swedish educators struggle with ways to deal with discussions surrounding the respective social issues of homosexuality and sexuality. However, this research has concluded that although including texts with lesbian sexual depictions in one's curriculum is a complicated undertaking it is one with many opportunities. The aims within the Swedish curriculum suggest what many researchers have agreed on: that representation with the aid of fictional texts is an important matter for young people. Therefore, teachers should not shy from utilizing young adult novels to start classroom discussions. But what this research has illuminated above all else, is that this should be done with careful consideration about the possible advantages as well as risks with novels with these social issues as themes. Through four sexual depictions many suggestions and ideas could be gathered. This indicates how much young adult text can differ from one another. In conclusion, it should therefore be emphasized that teachers should get familiarized not only with the texts they include in their teaching, but also with what research suggest about themes within literature and their impact on young readers.

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