

## Fictional Dialogue and the Construction of Interaction in Rosa Liksom's Short Stories

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the dynamics of fictional dialogue in three short stories by the Finnish author Rosa Liksom. These stories are constructed almost entirely of dialogue, with minimal involvement on the part of the narrator. We adopt two different approaches to dialogue. First, we analyze dialogue from a micro level, as interaction between the characters within the storyworlds, then from a more holistic perspective, paying attention to how dialogue contributes to the rhetorical structure and ethical interpretation of the stories. We show that resorting mainly to dialogue as a narrative mode works as a way of depicting tensions between Liksom's characters, and between them and the surrounding fictional world. This, in turn, engages the reader in an interpretative process to understand the story's logic both within the fictional worlds and on the level of communication between the implied author and the authorial audience.

### 1. Introduction

In this article we discuss the construction of interactional situations in Rosa Liksom's short stories, especially those that consciously foreground and play with dialogue as a narrative device. In her comically grim short prose, this Finnish author composes dialogues and monologues in which she uses both her native dialect of Lapland and urban slang in a highly original way. Liksom's laconic, almost rude style of storytelling is combined with a depiction of the lifestyles of underground, marginal, and lonely young people living on the fringes of society, acting against its rules and social order. The narrator's voice is often ironic and comical, and it is not always clear whether the author's perspective meets the values of her narrators and characters. Some critics have seen Liksom's parodic style as a manifestation of her reluctance to take a position regarding the morals of her story or the actions of her characters, which involve drug use, incest, and murder at the most extreme end. In this article, we take another look at the narrative ethics in Liksom's short stories. Our aim is to examine how, in her narratives, the technical choices related to the construction of dialogue generate a layered communicative and ethical situation. First, we analyze the dialogues as representations that portray communication between characters within the storyworld. Secondly, we examine the ways in which the fictional dialogue contributes to the rhetorical structure and ethics of the narrative texts at the higher level of hierarchy in the narrative transmission. Thus, our focus is on the feedback loop of ideas, values, and meanings

negotiated between authorial agency, the textual strategies of dialogue, and reader response (cf. Phelan 2005: 18).

Our article provides a detailed reading of three untitled short stories by Liksom (referred to as “Beer,” “Ship,” and “Stairs” in the text). In our rhetorical approach to Liksom’s stories, we perceive form and ethics as interconnected: storytelling is seen as a rhetorical act in which the narrative strategies (of dialogue) designed by the author have consequences for the reader’s emotional and ethical engagement with narratives (see e.g. Phelan 2005 & 2007, Booth 1988 & 1983, Nussbaum 1990). In addition to this rhetorical approach, we apply methods developed for the study of everyday conversation within Conversation Analysis (e.g. Heritage 1984, Stivers & Sidnell 2013), as well as a Goffmanian analysis of interaction (Goffman 1963) in an attempt to scrutinize the moment-by-moment unfolding of the fictional interaction between the characters (see section 2 for details).

The combination of a rhetorical and interactional approach provides a useful backdrop for our reading of Liksom’s three short stories, which are almost entirely based on dialogue. Each story portrays an encounter between two characters whose exchanges become the story’s focus. The characters are enclosed together in a restricted space, such as at the same restaurant table, which heightens the intensity of their “verbal duel” (Thomas 2012: 75). The conversation gradually discloses the characters’ personalities, their ideological viewpoints, and the complexities of their relationship, and these three issues become the kernel of Liksom’s storytelling. In these stories, the most extreme themes of Liksom’s narratives are missing. What all of the characters have in common, however, is that they share the same contempt toward conventional lifestyles. In addition, Liksom’s parodic texts often contain a weak male and a powerful female duo, subverting and transgressing gender stereotypes (Kivilaakso 2003: 165-166).

Various features of the open structure of modern short stories are manifested in Liksom’s vignettes. The tendency to avoid a fixed hierarchy of values, identities, and worldviews, however, places her texts in the category of postmodern fiction.<sup>1</sup> Each of Liksom’s stories begins *in medias res* and has an open ending. Each lacks a clear-cut plot, and through the dialogue provides only glimpses of characters’ moods and interrelations. The characters’ pasts, the meaning, and the final effect of their encounters are never explicitly addressed in the narratives. In addition, there is a minimum amount of orientation on the part of the narrator. Dialogues are framed only by the narrator’s short commentaries on the characters’ appearance, manner of speech, and silences, as well as concise

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<sup>1</sup> The fiction of Rosa Liksom (Anni Ylävaara, born 1958) has been seen as a postmodern play on identities. At the beginning of her career in particular, Liksom used her pseudonym as a means of making performances about herself as an artist. She would appear in public in different disguises and costumes; for instance, at the opening of her art exhibition in 1986 (at the same time an event marking the publication of one of her short story collections) she wore a military outfit, hiding among people dressed similarly. Thus, the pseudonym “Rosa Liksom” itself constitutes part of her work. Accordingly, Liksom’s texts can be read as parodies commenting on other texts in her oeuvre.

descriptions of the fictional setting. In effect, all of the stories call for the audience to actively participate in the interpretation of the characters' interpersonal relations. The characters' conversations involve various degrees of tension, and raise questions about the shared or conflicting values – not only between the characters but also with respect to the values communicated to the reader by the “implied author.”<sup>2</sup>

The first part of this article (Chapter 2) focuses on the basic dynamics of conversation as they manifest themselves in the interaction between fictional characters within storyworlds. We analyze the exchanges between characters from affective and intersubjective perspectives, concentrating on their mimetic aspects. How do the characters negotiate their values, attitudes, and worldviews in their discourse through their words? What suggestions of mutual understanding or disagreement can we find in the dialogues? How are these disagreements or affective tensions constructed in the text and conveyed to the reader? Our analysis of the characters' interactions emerges from the idea that dialogue itself is *action* that contributes to the narrative progression and internal logic of fictional texts (see Thomas 2005: 77-79). In these conversational stories, complications stemming from instabilities and tense situations between the characters unfold from the beginning, through the middle, and to the end. It is exactly these movements that the audience follows by judging or sympathizing with the characters and by constructing hypotheses about the thematic, ethical, and ideological components in the narrative (cf. Phelan 2005: 19-20).

The second part of the article (Chapter 3) discusses the narrative strategy of double address that invites the audience to engage cognitively and ethically in Lixsom's stories, but simultaneously to distance itself from her characters' values. As James Phelan (2005: 7) put it, narrative ethics is “art of indirection”: the same text simultaneously communicates two different purposes to two different audiences. Narrational ethics follows the line of narrative transmission from the author (through the implied author) to the authorial audience,<sup>3</sup> and at the same time from the narrator to the narratee,<sup>4</sup> that is, the audience situated

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<sup>2</sup> Since its introduction by Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), the concept of “implied author” has been a subject of much debate in narrative studies. Some scholars consider it a vague and undefined concept (e.g. Rimmon-Kenan 1983, Diengott 1993) or even argue for the abandonment of the notion altogether (Nünning 1997a & 1997b), whereas others find it to be among the basic, necessary categories of textual analysis (Chatman 1990, Nelles 1993). In this article, we use the rhetorical definition of the concept as outlined by Phelan (2005: 45): “The implied author is a streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author's capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties that play an active role in the construction of the particular text.” According to Phelan, therefore, the implied author is a version of the real author, i.e. the agent responsible for bringing the text into existence, and not a purely textual construction. An important aspect of rhetorical reading is “constructing a sense of the implied author” (ibid. 216).

<sup>3</sup> Phelan (2005: 19) uses the term “authorial audience” to refer to a hypothetical audience which every individual reader “seeks” to become part of during the reading process.

<sup>4</sup> “Narratee” is the audience within the text that is directly addressed by the narrator. It is a fictive entity to which the narrator directs his narration. The narratee may be represented either implicitly or explicitly.

within the text. Narrative ethics involves multileveled communication, but the feedback loop between the author and the audience always entails certain textual phenomena that are designed to evoke and guide the reader's cognitive, emotional, and ethical responses (Phelan 2005: 18).

Our aim in this second part of the article is to outline the ways in which narrative ethics are transmitted in Lixsom's behaviorist,<sup>5</sup> conversational short stories. While two of Lixsom's short stories ("Ship" and "Beer") are "mediated" by objective narrators, in her third vignette ("Stairs"), the narrator is the protagonist of the story as well. Despite this elemental difference, all three narratives resort to "elliptical" or "restricted narration." According to Phelan (2005: 29), restricted narration means "narration that records events but does not interpret or evaluate them." Phelan uses the notion of restricted narration to analyze the technique of the indirect narrative transmission of ethics in character narration (in texts where the narrator is also the character of the story). In Lixsom's behaviorist stories, on the other hand, the use of elliptical narration resembles the category of "underreporting" or "misreporting" in character narration. The term "underreporting" refers to narrative instances in which the narrator obviously tells the narratee less than she or he knows.<sup>6</sup> The narrator's deferred or suppressed knowledge calls the reader's attention to the potential epistemological or moral shortcomings in the first person narrator's story. There are gaps in the text that must be filled by the reader to infer the affective and ethical dimensions of the narrative.

## 2. The interaction between the characters in the stories

In this section we analyze the dialogue between Lixsom's characters as *interaction*, focusing on the details of how individual turns are designed and how each turn represents an understanding of the prior turn and creates expectations for the following turns (see Heritage 1984: 255 and also Thomas 2012: 78-79). Drawing on Conversation Analysis as a method, we focus on the sequences of speech (rather than isolated turns) and the ways in which the social relationships are depicted and constructed through the dialogue.

Our approach here bears resemblance to stylistic studies that make use of pragmatic models along with conversation- and discourse-analytic methods

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<sup>5</sup> "Behaviorist narrative" is a narrative limited to the detached portrayal of the characters' behavior (words and actions but not thoughts and feeling), their appearance, and setting. The narrator abstains from direct commentary and interpretation. For readers this means that they need to be more creative in ascribing mental states to fictional characters from less information than in other types of narrative. The concept "behaviorist narrative" derives from behaviorism as a psychological method that is based on the objective observation of other people as a source for conclusions and implications (Palmer 2004: 206).

<sup>6</sup> Phelan differentiates between six types of unreliable narration: misreporting, misreading, misevaluating (misregarding), and underreporting, underreading, and underregarding. These often occur in combination with each other. "Misreporting," for instance, involves explicit signs of unreliability occurring along the axes of knowledge, perception, and the values of the (character) narrator. The act of misreporting is a consequence of the narrator's lack of knowledge or mistaken values (Phelan 2005: 51-52).

when analyzing dialogue (see, e.g. Leech & Short 2007, Toolan 1985, 1987, Mildorf 2012; for overviews, see Nykänen & Koivisto 2013: 26-31 and Thomas 2012: 3-4). However, we will also pay close attention to the narrative situation and to the narrator's role in guiding the reader's interpretation of the dialogue. In this way our approach is similar to what is advocated by Thomas (2012; see also Nykänen & Koivisto 2013). She states that "at the micro level [the approach] would involve examining how far the characters monitor their utterances or those of others, while at the macro level we might focus on the narrator's framing of the character's utterances" (ibid. 53). Furthermore, the dialogue is not seen merely as something through which we can learn things about the characters and their relationship but also as dynamic activity that functions as building material for the narrative situation (see also Thomas 2012: 73-77). To quote Bakhtin (1984: 252, also cited in Thomas 2012: 83), "dialogue here is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself."

## 2.1 "Ship" and "Beer"

We begin our analysis with a comparison of the two stories "Ship" and "Beer." Both depict a conversation between two male friends, or "boys" as they are referred to, sitting at a table having dinner ("Ship") or drinking beer ("Beer"). These stories are remarkably similar in the sense that the characters are depicted as friends, but the reader is given no background information on their mutual history or how they ended up in that particular situation at the beginning of the story. All information is given during the course of events, and implicitly through the dialogue. This, of course, is typical of a literary piece that mainly relies, or is exclusively based, on dialogue as the narrative mode (see Thomas 2012: 84).

In both of these stories, the reader learns about the characters' personal opinions and values through their dialogue and the ways in which they react to each other's turns. The dynamics of the conversation also reveal issues about their relationship in terms of who dominates the interaction and what kind of tensions already existed between them, while tensions also emerge in the course of the dialogue and the story. In both stories, one of the boys is depicted as being more dominant. Moreover, he is presented as highly unlikable through his overconfident yet ignorant remarks and aggression toward others who have different values and ideals. Particularly in "Ship," the combination of ignorance and confidence is also a source of comedy. The friend's reactions stand in contrast to this way of conducting oneself. However, since they are referred to as "the boys" and as friends, the two protagonists in each story come across as a collective who share a similar kind of attitude toward life; it is only during the course of the story that the differences begin to emerge.

In both stories, the dialogue commences with a controversial assertion by the dominant boy. In "Ship," the discussion begins with a vulgar characterization of the food served to the boys, and in "Beer," with the announcement of a plan to leave a girlfriend. Both topics of conversation are something that the passive boy would have been able to affiliate with by agreeing or endorsing the other's

viewpoint. However, in neither story does he agree. Let us look at the dynamics of these disputes in each story in more detail. The first of Liksom's narratives, "Ship" (from the collection of short stories *One Night Stands*, 1985),<sup>7</sup> begins with a scene that introduces the two protagonists of the narrative, the two boys, who are sitting at a dinner table (later on we discover that they are on a ship, travelling to Spain): "The boys were sitting at the dinner table in silence" (Ship, 87).<sup>8</sup> The story unfolds as a description of the fictional setting, until the boys' discussion begins:

(...) The table was set according to international restaurant standards: a starched, white tablecloth, white porcelain plates with golden trim and long-stemmed crystal glasses.

The waitress carried a serving platter in her left hand and portioned out steaming lasagna, spiced with oregano, on the boys' plates of the smallest size.

"What kind of crap is this, no one is going to eat this shit; it smells like the plague," the fair-haired boy with big bones started the table talk. (Ship, 87)<sup>9</sup>

The opening scene of "Ship" serves as a frame that plays with the conventions of the genre of "table talk." The depiction of the restaurant scene meets the standards of the stereotypical setting of this genre. The representation of the civilized "art" of conversation is typical of a philosophical novel in which the fictional characters serve as mouthpieces of certain philosophical positions (cf. Thomas 2012: 75, see also Palmer 2005). In Liksom's story, however, the glamorous setting and the register of the characters' speech are highly discordant, as the opening line of the boys' dialogue illustrates. The contrast between the setting and the characters' colloquial, even vulgar manner of speech is relevant with regard to the reader's first impression of the two characters.<sup>10</sup> From very early on, discordances also start to emerge.

The dominant boy, referred to as "the fair-haired," criticizes the food in three different turns without any responses from "the black-haired" friend (or at least the responses are not reported). This non-responsiveness may already indicate disagreement. When the black-haired boy finally responds, he quite explicitly refuses to take part in the fair-haired boy's critique:

<sup>7</sup> The original Finnish title is *Yhden yön pysäkki*.

<sup>8</sup> "Pojat istuivat päivällispöydässä ja vaikenivat."

<sup>9</sup> "Pöytä oli katettu kansainvälisten ravintolasääntöjen mukaan: tärkätty valkoinen liina, valkoiset kultareunaiset posliinilautaset ja korkeajalkaiset kristallipikarit. Tarjoilijatar kantoi vasemmalla kädellään tarjoiluvatia ja annosteli kummankin pojan pienimmälle lautaselle oreganolla höystettyä, höyryävää lasagnea." All translations of Liksom's texts are ours.

<sup>10</sup> In "Ship" as well as "Beer," the characters' manner of speech is identifiable as the dialect used in northern Finland. Liksom is famous for using this variant in her work, as well as the slang spoken in Helsinki.

“Don’t complain all the time, goddamit... Surely you can eat this if you have to.”

He tried to grin at his friend under his eyebrows. (Ship, 88)<sup>11</sup>

However, even though the black-haired boy’s response resists the fair-haired boy’s complaint, it is not entirely opposite. His claim that one is able to eat the food if one must, implies that even though he does not consider it as repulsive as his friend, he is not exactly pleased with the food either. The narrator’s comment about the black-haired boy trying to grin at his friend confirms this. That is to say, the black-haired boy simultaneously tries to adapt to the new situation and maintain some sort of harmony with his friend.

The opposite stances taken toward foreign cultures and habits by the protagonists create tensions between them throughout the story. The fair-haired boy continuously complains about the food and other circumstances, whereas the black-haired boy is more open to the new culture. The narrator reports that “he ate everything without moaning,” tries to smile to the waitresses, and also tries to initiate conversation on other topics besides the unsatisfactory food. However, these attempts too seem to fail:

“So, is this Spain, then,” started the black-haired when a giant oil tanker appeared in the window of the dining hall.

“Didn’t it say in the travel brochure that we will get there around noon.” The fair-haired did not look at the window but kept putting sugar back in the shaker from the tablecloth. (Ship, 89)<sup>12</sup>

Both the verbal and nonverbal actions of the fair-haired boy indicate that he is not oriented to their arrival at the destination. He makes reference to what was said in the travel brochure instead of relying on his own perception of the surroundings, unlike what his friend (at least implicitly) invites him to do. The following comment by the narrator shows that he is preoccupied with other things, that is, putting sugar back in the shaker after pouring it on the table. This indicates his disinterest, and thus a certain discordance between the boys.

However, the exchanges between the boys in “Ship” do not fail on all counts. The boys reach a moment of mutual understanding when starting to discuss the type of coffee they had during their trip. Interestingly, at this point it is not made entirely clear which of the boys says what.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Älä ny jumalauta siinä koko aikaa valita... Kyllähän tätä syöpi jos on pakko.’ Se yritti virnistellä alta kulmien ystävällensä.”

<sup>12</sup> “Jaa, tämäkös son se Espania’, aloitti mustahiuksinen kun ruokasalin ikkunaan ilmestyi valtava harmaa öljysäiliö. ‘Eikös siinä matkailuesitteessä niin seissy, että puoleltapäivin olhaan maissa.’ Vaalea ei vilkaissut ikkunaan vaan lappoi sokeria pöytäliinalta takaisin sirotimeen.”

<sup>13</sup> Since the black-haired boy has first indicated his wish to get coffee, he is probably the one saying “So finally we get some coffee”; however, the point is that this is not made clear by the use of speech tags.

The waitress came carrying a coffee pot.

“Kaffe, kaffe, yeah.” The black-haired pointed at his coffee cup with his finger and showed his yellow row of teeth.

“So finally we get some coffee. This is what I have been waiting for since that fucking poison we had at the airport in Italy. Do you remember?”

“Well why wouldn’t I remember, after those fifteen Russians I had.”

Both grinned happily. The fair-haired playfully shook his head and sipped the coffee. (Ship, 90)<sup>14</sup>

As an answer to the question about remembering the taste of coffee at the airport, one boy issues an ironic comment, implying that he does not remember because of heavy drinking. This is followed by the narrator’s report on the boys’ joint activity embodying a shared affect toward what is being talked about (“both grinned happily”). The fact that the speakers are not identified and that their identities cannot be clearly inferred on the basis of the narrator’s comments possibly suggests that at this point the boys are very much alike – to the extent that there is no need to separate them. Fooling around drunk appears to be something that the boys share and what their friendship is based on; it is thus a “safe” topic that raises no friction between them. However, this is the only passage where their attitudes do not conflict.

While “Ship” depicts a rather multifaceted picture of a friendship, the other story about two nameless boys, “Beer,” is much more minimal and straightforward in terms of depicting the tense interaction between the characters. The narrative (from the collection of short stories *The Forgotten Quarter*, 1986)<sup>15</sup> begins with an opening phrase almost identical to that of “Ship”: “The boys were sitting in the shopkeeper’s kitchen and drinking beer” (Beer, 72).<sup>16</sup> The opening line is followed by a short depiction of the characters’ appearances: “One had a sunburned face and the other had a small birthmark on his right cheek” (ibid.).<sup>17</sup> This minimal background information on the boys’ looks is later utilized by the narrator to identify the speakers. The conversation between the characters starts with an announcement by the boy with the birthmark:

– I guess I should leave the gal.

– Hell no.

– I don’t know, I’m tired of her.

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<sup>14</sup> “Tarjoilijatar tuli kahvikannu kädessä. ‘Kaffe, kaffe, joo.’ Mustahiuksinen osoitti sormellaan kahvikuppia ja näytti keltaisen hammasrivistönsä. ‘No jopa päästiin kahvile. Tätä molen oottanu siitä asti ko eilen juothiin sielä Italian lentokentälä sitä saatanan myrkkyyä. Muistaks sie?’” ‘No mikä etten muistas, enhän mie ollu heittäny helttään ko viisitoista venäläistä.’ Kumpikin virmisteli tyytyväisinä. Vaalea puisteli leikkisästi päätään ja ryypäsi kahvia.”

<sup>15</sup> The original Finnish title is *Unohdettu vartti*.

<sup>16</sup> “Pojat istuivat kauppiaan keittiössä ja joivat keskikaljaa.”

<sup>17</sup> “Toisella oli auringon polttamat kasvot ja toisella pieni syntymämerkki oikeassa poskessa.”

Silence fell over the table. They had been sitting there since midday. They had placed the empty bottles on the floor next to the table to form a half-circle. The sky above the shop had faded in the hands of the moist spring wind.

– What are you talking about? The other boy turned an astonished gaze toward his friend. (Beer, 72)<sup>18</sup>

For the reader, it is not clear whether the first remark begins a new topic of conversation or whether it is related to something they have already been talking about earlier; at least the “gal” is marked as something previously discussed or mutually known by the determiner *se* (‘the/that,’ see Laury 1997). The response by the other boy is categorically opposite and affect-laden by a curse word (“*hell* no”). This straightforward opposition sets the tone for the following conversation. In the next turn, the boy who raised the topic explains his plan, saying that he is tired of the “gal.” This is received in silence (“silence fell over the table”), which may be indicative of disagreement but also astonishment, being too shocked to speak. The silence would then function as an initial display of surprise (see Wilkinson & Kitzinger 2006: 165-166), confirmed by the boy’s verbal reaction, that is, the surprise-indicative question “what are you talking about?” By asking this question, the boy further confronts the logic behind his friend’s decision instead of showing understanding.

The depiction of the dynamics of the conversation in “Beer” is similar to “Ship” in the sense that the characters disagree on the central theme discussed in the story. In contrast to “Ship,” however, this disagreement is not mitigated in any way. That is, the friend’s contributions consist merely of aggressively formulated objections. Curse words, descriptions of the tone of voice, and expressions on the boy’s face serve as indicators of his attitude and emotional state:

– What are you talking about? The other boy turns his **astonished gaze** toward his friend.

– Coz’ I dunno, she’s still a kid. I’m an old hound; I’ve seen and lived it all. She hasn’t seen anything. She doesn’t know what this is all about and I’m sick of her babbling.

– Don’t **fucking** lie, said the one with the birthmark, with **repressed anger** in his voice, – of course you have another woman because you’re that kind of stud.

– I sure have, she’s a woman from the village.

– **Oh fuck**, I’ll bet she’s stuck-up.

– That’s what she should be, if there was something to boast about.

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<sup>18</sup> “– Vissiin pitäis jättää se tyär.

– Ei helvetissä. – En tiä, molen kyllästynny siihen.

Hiljaisuus asettui pöydän ylle. He olivat istuneet siinä aamupäivästä asti ja tyhjät pullot he olivat asettaneet jonkinlaiseen puolikaareen pöydän viereen lattialle. Taivas kaupan yläpuolella oli haalistunut kevään kostean tuulen kynsissä. – Mitäs sie puhut? Toinen pojista nosti hölmistyneen katseensa ystäväänsä.”

– Don't **fucking** brag.

The boys fell into silence. They emptied one more beer and were both pretending to be watching a football game on the color TV. The shopkeeper collected the empty bottles from the table. (Beer, 72-73, emphases added)<sup>19</sup>

Even though the emotions are negative throughout the conversation and the story, their quality shifts along the way. The first emotion depicted is amazement: the astonished question (“what are you talking about?”) is followed by a reporting phrase (“the other boy turned his astonished gaze toward his friend”) describing the expression on his face, which makes this emotion explicit. In response to the dominant boy’s explanation, the friend accuses him of lying. The aggression is amplified by the use of a curse word. Furthermore, once again emotions are being explicated, in this instance through the tone of voice (“said the one with a birthmark with repressed anger in his voice”), whereby the initial emotion, astonishment, is changed into anger. Toward the end of the story there is yet another shift in the negative emotions experienced by the boy with the birthmark. The dominant boy tells a story that is intended to illustrate the negative qualities of his girlfriend, but which is highly unfair (see detailed analysis in section 3). The boy with a birthmark receives this story with the question “Is that the reason why you’re leaving the gal?” accompanied by the reporting clause “the other asked with a sad expression on his face.” The whole story ends with a similar depiction: “there was a sad and worried expression on the face of the one with a birthmark.” The story thus depicts a trajectory of emotions from astonishment and disbelief (caused by the unexpected announcement) to disapproval and overt anger, to finally sadness and worry. At the same time, the reason for the intensity of emotions regarding the dominant boy’s plan to leave his girlfriend remains unclear. In our later reading of the rhetorical situation of this short story, we provide a more detailed interpretation of the affective elements in the boys’ discussion.

In addition to the dialogue proceeding in this way, the story contains three descriptions of silence that demonstrate the consequences of the hostile comments with respect to the progression of the discourse. The first was already discussed at the beginning of the analysis. The other two further demonstrate that the total lack of cooperation between the boys results in uncomfortable silences, suggesting alienation between them. The uneasiness of the second silence is highlighted by the narrator (see the ending of the previous extract): “they were both pretending to be watching a football game on the color TV.” This suggests that their silence is not just a natural pause due to the non-continuous nature of the conversation, but something that the characters try to

<sup>19</sup> “– Mitäs sie puhut? Toinen pojista nosti hölmistyneen katseensa ystävänsä.

– Ko en mie tiä, son niin kläppi vielä. Mie olen vanha trimmattu ratsu, molen nähny ja eläny kaiken. Se ei ole nähny mithään. Ei se tiä mistä täälä on kysymys ja minua tympäsee sen hölinät.

– Älä saatana valehtele, sanoi syntymämerkkinen tukahtuneen vihaisella äänellä, — sulla on tietekki toinen akka ko olet tuomonen osuuskunnan sonni.

– Nii onki, son yksi akka tuolta kyliltä.

– Hyi helvetti, leuhka tietekki.

– Leuhka se pittää ollakki jos on millä leuhkia.

– Älä saatana levveile.”

avoid by pretending to be occupied by something else. The story also ends with a depiction of silence:

The boys drank another five beers without saying much and when they left into the bright night there still was a sad and worried expression on the face of the one with the birthmark. (Beer, 74)<sup>20</sup>

This silence is now longer than the previous ones – measured by the number of beers the boys have had. The previous one lasted for one beer, while this one lasts for five. Arguably then, they do not resume their conversation. However, neither do they leave. This suggests that drinking beer is good enough a reason to remain in an uncomfortable situation, which, in turn, reveals something about the boys as a collective.<sup>21</sup> Drinking is obviously something that they have in common, possibly something their friendship is based on; this is a point of resemblance to “Ship.” However, the continuous sad expression on the face of the one with a birthmark shows that the conflict between the two is unresolved and, on a more general level, the friends’ shared view of the world has suffered a sharp blow.

## 2.2 “Stairs”

The third short story, “Stairs,” is considerably different in terms of the relationship between the characters. In this story, two strangers meet for the first time. The narrative technique is also different: the narrator is one of the participants, which means that the story has a first person character narrator. Still, there is a sense of anonymity in this story as well since neither participant is named. Similarly to the two stories analyzed above, we learn about the characters only through the dialogue and behavioristic observations provided by the narrator. We will begin with a close analysis of the opening of the dialogue: it depicts not only how the two characters meet, but also raises questions about their personal histories and motives both within the fictional world and with respect to what is being communicated to the reader.

The opening scene of “Stairs” (from the collection *One Night Stands*) contains a depiction of the arrival of an unknown first person narrator to a Moscow café. Compared to “Ship” and “Beer,” this short story has a more elaborate opening and ending frame, due to the greater length of the narrative as a whole. The opening scene provides all the background information about the protagonist the reader will get. The narrator had previously visited the café with her friend named Kolja. The boy had bought her some sweet pastries by way of saying goodbye after her graduation from a university in Moscow. The beginning of the narrative registers the first person narrator’s perception of the café’s interior and

<sup>20</sup> “Pojat joiivat vielä viisi kaljaa vaiteliaina ja kun he poistuivat valoisaan yöhön syntymämerkkisen kasvoilla oli edelleen surullinen ja huolestunut ilme.”

<sup>21</sup> This description may also be a reference to the cultural cliché that it is socially acceptable for Finnish men to sit together in silence and that there is nothing unusual about it.

the other customers. She chooses two pastries and two coffees from the counter and then looks around for a place to sit:

I stood for a moment in the middle of the floor and picked a table that was occupied by a lonely negro.

“Is this seat free?”

“Y-yes”, he [“it” in the original]<sup>22</sup> answered, glancing at me.

I threw my jacket on the chair and tried to act nonchalantly. I took a book from my bag and began to read.

We sat quietly for a long time. I noticed that even though he was pretending to be reading some English economics magazine, he kept glancing at me somberly. He sat with his back straight and his neck long.

I raised my eyes from the book and looked straight into his. That startled him enough to open his mouth, and he asked, whispering:

“Are you Russian?”

“How so? . . . No . . . I’m Finnish . . . from Finland you know [In English].

He stared at me suspiciously.

“Oh from Finland . . . many lakes [In English] . . .” His face got more relaxed.

“Are you sure?”

“Oh God [In English], why would I lie?” (Stairs, 73)<sup>23</sup>

The first person narrator’s manner of referring to the other character with such a controversial term as “negro” (*neekeri*) influences the reader’s first impression of the narrator’s character and sets an ambivalent ethical tone for the encounter between the two characters. Obviously, the narrator and the lonely “negro” do not know each other and have not agreed to meet. However, they end up sitting at the same table. It is the narrator who plays an active role in creating the possibility for conversation: she asks for permission to sit with the man. In fact, the reader is informed that the narrator *chose* that particular table. The way the permission is granted by the “negro” already informs the reader about his

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<sup>22</sup> In colloquial Finnish, the pronoun *se* (‘it’) is typically used as a third person pronoun. Lixsom’s narrator uses this pronoun as well. See also footnote 48.

<sup>23</sup> “Seisoin hetken keskilattialla ja valitsin pöydän, jossa istui yksinäinen neekeri.

‘Onks tää tuoli vapaa?’

‘O.. on’, se vastasi ja vilkaisi minua.

Heitin takkini tuolin karmille ja yritin olla niin kuin ei mitään. Otin laukusta kirjan ja rupesin lukemaan.

Me istuttiin pitkään hiljaa. Huomasin, että vaikka se oli lukevinaan jotakin englanninkielistä talouslehteä, se kyräili minua kulmiensa alta. Se istui selkä suorana ja kaula pitkällä.

Nostin katseeni kirjasta ja katsoin sitä suoraan silmiin. Se säikähti sen verran, että avasi suunsa ja kysyi kuiskaamalla:

‘Oletteko venäläinen?’

‘Miten niin?... En... Olen suomalainen... From Finland, you know.’

Se tuijotti minua epäluuloisesti.

‘Ai suomalainen... many lakes...’ Sen ilme muuttui rennommaksi. ‘Ihanko varmasti?’

‘O God, miksi valehtelisin?’”

character or at least his state of mind. The response *on* ('yes') is uttered with a stutter, which indicates nervousness or insecurity. The reported quick glance at the narrator supports this interpretation. They then withdraw from *focused interaction* (to use Goffman's term from 1963) – they just sit at the same table but do not engage in conversation. However, because they are at the same table, they are in an "open region" (Goffman 1963: 134), which may license a conversation.

At the beginning of the scene, there is mutual agreement about not conversing. That is, both are engaged or pretending to be engaged in a solitary activity, reading. In Goffman's (1963: 84) terms, they are thus practicing *civil inattention*. However, the participants are depicted as being extremely aware of one another, indicating that the situation is clearly tense. This becomes apparent through the description of the man's bodily behavior: he keeps glancing at the narrator and looks very alert ("He sat with his back straight and his neck long"). What is more, the narrator reveals to the reader how she wishes the man to perceive her: "I tried to act nonchalantly."

This mutual monitoring is followed by an overt challenge to initiate focused interaction: the narrator looks into the other's eyes, which is something that one cannot legitimately do unless interacting with the other (Goffman 1963: 20). This act is thus a violation of civil inattention (Goffman 1963: 136), but at the same time an invitation to engage in a focused interaction. The actual dialogue is initiated by the "negro." He is first depicted as being "startled" by the narrator staring at him, which is confirmed by the actual first turn in the dialogue. The first turn, "are you Russian," asked in a whisper, indicates that it is a question of some urgency, something that must be resolved before the narrator can be trusted, and before they can have an actual conversation. Following the narrator's unburdening answer the "negro" gradually becomes less suspicious, which is – again – reflected in the narrator's comments on his nonverbal behavior ("He stared at me suspiciously. ... His face got more relaxed."). The fragile trust that has been achieved allows for a proper interaction between the two. However, the "negro's" suspicious attitude is again manifested later in the story, but this time toward other people. The reader learns about this mainly through the narrator's interpretative observations of his bodily behavior; for example, when the waitress brings the narrator's order, "The negro turned his gaze quickly back to the magazine and seemed absent" (Stairs, 73).<sup>24</sup>

Once the actual conversation between the characters is in progress, the distribution of turns becomes more unequal than at the beginning of the encounter. The "negro" launches into long narratives about his personal history, and the narrator contributes only minimally. Of course, after he has offered to tell his "life history," the "negro" understandably becomes the main speaker, while the narrator is expected to adopt the role of listener (see, e.g. Sacks 1974: 344). However, even taking this into account, the narrator's contributions are minimal by design. The narrator does not comment on the "negro's" narratives in any way apart from nodding or shaking her head when asked something. In

<sup>24</sup> "Neekeri käänsi katseensa nopeasti takaisin lehteen ja näytti poissaolevalta."

other words, the remainder of the story after the initial exchange appears more or less a monologue that only pauses for descriptions of the characters' nonverbal behavior as well as reports of silences and what happens during these.

What seems to lie behind the dynamics of the beginning of the encounter between the narrator and the "negro" is a lack of intersubjectivity in terms of understanding the other person's goals and motivations. Since there is nothing instrumental in the encounter between the two protagonists, it is not clear to them what the other one "wants," which causes mistrust and suspicion. For instance, why did the narrator pick that particular table? Of course, the reader is not told whether other tables were free, or whether they were all taken so that she had to choose between occupied ones. The other, (even) more overtly depicted dilemma is why the "negro" is so suspicious. He seems to believe that there is a hidden agenda behind the narrator's actions – and, for that matter, everyone else's too. In terms of interaction between the narrator and the reader, the central dilemma is that the narrator discloses neither her intentions, nor her attitude toward the "negro" to the reader, which makes the narrator appear potentially unreliable.

In this section, we have seen that in Lixsom's three short stories, the dynamics of dialogues function as the central resource for meaning-making. In two of the stories, "Ship" and "Beer," the dialogues between two "boys" depict a growing tension and discrepancy between their perspectives and attitudes toward life. This is not only observable in the way the boys respond to each other's turns, but also in the depiction of their nonverbal behavior and the silences provided by the narrator. In the third story, "Stairs," the central issue affecting the dynamics of the dialogue is the fact that the two strangers in the coffee shop are unaware of each other's motives when engaging in the interaction, which leads to mistrust and suspicion. In each story, the role of the narrator in framing the dialogues and guiding their interpretation is distinctly minimal, which leaves the interpretative work solely to the reader. Furthermore, in "Stairs," we saw that the role of the narrator is minimal to the extent of being potentially fallible or untrustworthy. In the next section, we will examine the role of the narrator and the ethical dimensions of the three stories more closely. We will see that the narrator's potential unreliability and the restrictedness in terms of disclosing the characters' motives form the basis for an ethical reading of the dialogues.

### **3. Interpreting dialogue: The ethical dimension**

The first person narrator's potential unreliability in "Stairs" is connected to Lixsom's use of restricted character narration in her story. The first person narrator seems to be underreporting facts, events, and her intentions: she is not telling the narratee everything she knows. In Lixsom's "Ship" and "Beer," the behaviorist technique often relies on elliptic narration instead. The fictional dialogue is framed only by the objective narrator's short commentaries that do not include explicit evaluations of the characters. However, as we have seen, these comments are not entirely "behavioristic" because they often provide

minimal interpretations of events and characters by registering the characters' bodily postures, gestures, or tones of voice, even attributing emotional states to them. This introduces an emotional layer which is relevant for the ethical dimension in our interpretation.

Liksom's ability to communicate her perspective to her audience, even while restricting herself to the dialogues between the characters, is related to her effective technique of using "double communication," typical of parody.<sup>25</sup> The juxtaposition of the character's ethically problematic statements and Liksiom's implicit ones creates an effect of simultaneous comedy and tragedy. The reader may laugh at the characters' ignorance and their false self-aggrandizement, but at the same time is able to recognize the ethically distorted relations between them. The characters' evaluations do not necessarily coincide with the values of the implied author. The two techniques of representing the characters' interaction – restricted and elliptic narration – are examined in the following rhetorical analyses of Liksiom's three short stories.

### 3.1 "Beer"

We begin our discussion of the ethics in Liksiom's storytelling through a rhetorical reading of "Beer." The first step in the interpretation of this dimension of Liksiom's behaviorist narrative involves the manner in which characters behave and judge others within the storyworld (cf. Phelan 2005: 23). As our analysis of the interpersonal relations between the two boys showed, their communication is defined by constant disagreement and tension. However, Liksiom's narrator does not explicitly reveal the motives for the repressed anger and other emotions evident in the passive boy's voice. The unfolding dialogue, however, indicates that his emotional responses are somehow related to the notions of masculinity in the dominant boy's speech. His friend's talk of himself as an "old hound" is modified in the passive boy's response that reinforces the impression of his friend as a sexually (more) potent male, having his choice of women: "of course you have another woman because you are that kind of stud." Whether this comment is a marker of the boy's irony or reluctant flattery is never explicated to the reader. It is precisely this intersubjective tension between the boys – and the narrator's avoidance of disclosing the motives for that tension – that invites the reader to consider the ethics underlying the boys' exchange.

Undoubtedly, Liksiom deliberately creates two alternative ways of reading the passive boy's reaction to the dominant boy's boasting. The anger in the passive boy's voice clearly signals his annoyance over his friend's overconfidence ("Don't fucking brag"). In this respect, his frustration can be interpreted as an expression of the repressed aggression of the "weaker" male. However, toward the end of the narrative there appears another line of interpretation that becomes more prominent the more loudly the boy presents his ideas on the

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<sup>25</sup> By "double communication" we mean the author's use of direction and indirection in a rhetorical situation that is doubled: the author is able to make a single text communicate to two audiences simultaneously (the narrator's and the author's) and for two different purposes (the narrator's and the author's) (cf. Phelan 2005: 1, 18).

relations between women and men. The disagreement between the boys seems to be more about the way in which the dominant boy treats his girlfriend. At the beginning of the conversational exchange, he presents himself as an older and wiser person who “has seen and lived through it all,” and who is tired of the naïve “babbling” and “giggling” of his girlfriend. She does not “know what this is all about.” However, Liksom’s choice of letting the narrator identify the speaker as “a boy” (rather than “a man”) suggests a cockiness in his attitude, not only toward his girlfriend but also toward the other boy.

Thus, the emotional intensity in the passive boy’s voice can be interpreted as reflecting the implied author’s perspective. The boy’s feelings of disbelief and worriedness are linked to general observations about the harshness of the way men can treat women. The narrative of the dominant boy’s trip to his friend’s summer cottage is revealing in this respect. According to the boy, his girlfriend has ruined his weekend by offering to join a trip that the boy had been planning with another friend. The plan to repair a boat is forgotten as soon as the boys begin to drink – the actual purpose of the trip: “We didn’t repair any boat there, we certainly didn’t. We started drinking, and we drank for many days. We were crazily wasted and led a bad life on the beach, and we drank. That woman was sitting there on the cottage’s stairs and kept watching, and I thought ‘hell, go ahead and look; you’ll see what kind of a man I am’” (Beer, 73).<sup>26</sup> The dominant boy’s opinions about the role of women in general posit an ethical challenge for the reader. He makes many categorical statements about the roles of men and women in relation to one another (“Then I made clear to that woman that it’s better for women not to stick their nose into the boat business as that’s the business of men. I kept cursing and asking why in hell she had to come along to spy on us. I said that on a men’s trip there is no time for pussies”<sup>27</sup>; “The woman needs to be hefty and potent in all ways, you can’t make a kid your wife.”)<sup>28</sup> However, the implied author’s choice of registering only the characters’ speech and revealing almost nothing of their thoughts leaves room for the audience to construct the ethical situation from the information given in the dialogue.

The theme of heavy drinking as an expression of “being a man” is modified in the present events of the short story to be the shared activity of drinking beer between the men. In this world of male bonding there is no place for women. The dynamics between the dominant boy and the girl about to be abandoned are disclosed in the boy’s description of the argument that ends the trip. The comic effect of the argument is generated by the reader’s recognition of the disproportional nature of the boy’s aggressive reaction: “Well, on the morning we were supposed to leave she became sulky. I thought that finally she got pissed off. I drove the car like crazy and didn’t ever look at her. I drove the car to

<sup>26</sup> “Ei me mithään venettä korjattu, alethiin ryypiskelheen ja ryypäthiin monta päivää. Molima hulluna päissä ja piethiin pahaa elämää sielä rannala ja juothiin. Se akka istu siinä rantasaunan rappusilla ja vahtasi ja mie aattelin, että kato saatana niin näet minkälainen molen mieheksi.”

<sup>27</sup> “Mie tehin selväksi sille akale, että venehommat on miesten ja että akkojen on turha tukkia nokkaansa niihin asioihin. Mie kirosin sitä, että mitä helvettiä sen piti laittautua matkhaan ja tulla vahtaahmaan. Mie sanoin sille, että miesten reissuilla ei pillut paina mithään.” (Beer, 74-75)

<sup>28</sup> “Akanhan pitää olla pyylevä ja kaikin puolin pystyvä, ei kläpistä vaimoksi ole” (Beer, 74).

the crossroads, and there she burst out and shouted why I hadn't even fucked her during the trip" (Beer, 73).<sup>29</sup> The girlfriend's loud protest against the boy's neglect seems to be eagerly expected – or even provoked – by him, which reinforces the comic effect of the boy's complaints. Hence, in "Beer," the ethics of what is told is established in the relations between the characters and constitute the first layer of an ethical reading of the story. On this level of communication, we can read how characters judge others in their mutual interactions.

The second step in the interpretation of the story's narrative ethics, however, pertains to the *narrator's* relation to the told, to the telling, and to the audience (cf. Phelan 2005: 23). The narrator's "story" consists of the registered discourse between a) the characters and b) the commentary on their actions and interactions. Therefore, the ethics of the telling and the narrative progression of the story involve author-narrator relationships with respect to a general strategy of telling, that is, choosing one kind of narrator rather than another, choosing to communicate through dialogue rather than narration, and so on (Phelan & Rabinowitz 2013: 155-156). An implied author's choice of a certain type of narrator has consequences for the ethical dimension of his or her communication to the audience. In "Beer" (and "Ship"), the implied author's choice of having an objective, detached narrator (who does not take a position with respect to the characters' evaluations) makes the rhetorical situation more complex. This line of narrative transmission also involves the implied author communicating to her audience for her own purposes, both in terms of the story and the narrator's telling of it (cf. Phelan 2005: 18).

In "Beer," the relationship between the implied author's perspective and the characters' talk is a highly ironic one. The use of the double address of parody engages the reader both emotionally and ethically in the story. The gap between the characters' explicit attitudes and the implied author's implicit ones (as well as the conflicting values between the characters) generates a rhetorical situation in which the reader is invited to feel either empathy or antipathy toward the characters. By letting the narrator register the markers of emotions (such as anger and sadness) in the passive boy's voice and body language, the implied author invites the reader to sympathize with him. At the same time, the reader is more inclined to feel antipathy toward the dominant boy, who becomes the mouthpiece for aggressive masculine boasting typical of the culture of adolescent (uneducated) men.

Liksom's choice of elliptical narration provides a useful guide for the reader to recognize certain stereotypes of gender and masculinity without resorting to a fixed set of values or explicit commentary on the part of the narrator. The disagreements between the speakers call into question the ideals of male bonding as represented in the dominant boy's talk. The status of a "potent" man in the social hierarchy is linked to the naïve set of values concerning that

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<sup>29</sup> "No, lähtöpäivän aamuna se alko tuppisuuksi ja mie aattelin, että jopa viimein nousi akala kusi päähän. Mie ajoin autoa saatanan lujjaa enkä kattonukhaan sitä. Mie ajoin sen tiehaahraan ja siinä se mölättyä oikein kieroksilla, että ko mie en pannu sitä sielä reissula."

hierarchy. The passive boy seems to recognize this naiveté. The dominant boy's standards for choosing a woman are comically related to his ideals of masculinity. He finds the value in his new woman through her brother's accomplishments: "I don't know about the new woman, but she has a good brother. Last winter he won the races with his bull" (Beer, 73).<sup>30</sup> The expressions of "sadness" and "worriedness" on the face of his friend, when the boys leave the shop, constitute the final mood of the story, calling for the reader to emotionally and ethically engage with the other boy's position.

### 3.2 "Ship"

In "Ship," Liksom uses similar techniques of irony and double communication in the depiction of the two young boys' trip to Spain. Compared to the conversational exchange between the boys in "Beer," the two protagonists in this narrative share approximately the same values. Even though the boys' evaluations of the things they have experienced during the trip may differ, they do understand each other: they form a collective. The boys' disagreements seem to stem from their different attitudes toward new experiences rather than from a more profound conflict of values. It is their communication with other people (of different nationalities) that tends to fail. The boys' attempts at making themselves understood by speaking Finnish, which leads to misunderstandings, are comical. One of the boys' attempts to communicate with the foreigners is motivated by the fair-haired boy's wish to have some butter on his bread. His friend tries to explain his intentions to the German-speaking people sitting at the next table: "'Voita [butter],' he [it] said" (Ship, 88).<sup>31</sup> The boy's terse question asked in Finnish triggers confusion in the German party, but eventually they agree on how to act: "Finally they reached a mutual understanding, and one of them handed over a can of water and nodded his head in a friendly way" (ibid.). The lack of understanding between the black-haired boy and the Germans comically leads to misunderstanding and the boys not being able to function together. The fair-haired boy scolds his friend, who smiles uncomfortably at the strangers and refuses to make another try ("They don't understand anything").<sup>32</sup>

Liksom's use of irony in "Ship" is connected to the reader's recognition of the discrepancy between the boys' rude, vulgar behavior and the friendliness of the people they encounter. The boys' lack of communication skills is not only about their ignorance of language. They do not know how to behave. Their absence of table manners is manifested especially in the black-haired boy's gestures and appearance. He comments on the small-sized dishes, speaking Finnish to the waitress: "Oh hell, this is a horse's diet. Bread and water, like in a prison" (Ship, 89).<sup>33</sup> Naturally, the waitress does not understand a word but smiles in response. There are also other indications of the boys' uncivilized manners

<sup>30</sup> " – En mie siitä uuesta akasta muuten, mutta ko sillä on niin hyä veli. Se voitti menheenä talvena härälänsä kuninkuusajot."

<sup>31</sup> "'Voita', se sanoi."

<sup>32</sup> "Eihän ne mithään ymmärrä."

<sup>33</sup> "Kyllä helvetti tuli konikuuri. Vettä ja leipää ko kakolassa."

which are in discordance with conventional etiquette of “table talk.” After the dinner, the black-haired boy opens the buttons of his trousers. There are stains of red pasta sauce on the tablecloth and on his T-shirt. All these details are recorded in the narrator’s objective report of the boys’ actions, but no evaluations of their behavior are included.

The strategy of using the objective narrator as the “observer” of the characters’ behavior serves the implied author’s agenda, to parody her characters. On the level of narrative transmission from narrator to narratee, there are no explicit markers or commentary on the characters’ crudeness. However, the implied author’s perspective seems to emerge from the reader’s recognition of the contrast between the protagonists and the other people, who know how to behave according to what might be called “international restaurant standards.” The civilized manners of dining are juxtaposed with the standards of restaurants mentioned by the narrator at the beginning of the story. Throughout the narrative, the boys are shown violating social conventions. In exposing this lack of cultural competence, Liksi skillfully utilizes the cultural narrative of Finnish behavior abroad. In particular, the boys’ talk of the lack of “proper Finnish coffee” (“kunnon suomalaista kahvia”) is easily recognized by Finnish readers as a reference to the stereotypical behavior of Finnish tourists. However, alongside the cultural narrative of Finns as tourists, another narrative related to the masculine culture of Lapland in the north of Finland appears. This narrative involves the themes of heavy drinking, masculine aggression, and male bonding familiar from the story “Beer.”

In “Ship,” a depiction of nationality and masculinity is used to stage the protagonists’ simultaneous insecurity, defiance, and self-boosting when facing a foreign culture. The boys find mutual understanding in their shared distrust of the Spanish authorities. “This is a military state” (Ship, 89), the black-haired boy says of Spain.<sup>34</sup> At first, the other boy disagrees, but eventually ends up imagining a potential encounter with the Spanish police: “If they only came and mumbled something at me, I would wring their necks ... I bet that would keep them quiet,” he says with aggression (ibid.).<sup>35</sup> The black-haired boy teases his friend by questioning his physical competence. The narrator has earlier described him as being the one “with a trim body.”

“With those muscles of yours! Well, if you managed to approach them from behind that would work ... then they couldn’t do anything.”

“Did you say from behind ... No way in hell! Straight on from the front. Police have never fucked with me before, you know that.”

“Yes, I do know”, said the black-haired emphatically (...). (Ship, 89-90)<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> “Tämä on poliisivaltio.”

<sup>35</sup> “Jos vain tulevat mulle jotaki sönkkäähmään niin mie väänän niskat nurin heti ... eihän ne siitä sitte hiljene.”

<sup>36</sup> “Sinun lihaksilla! No jos takkaapäin onnistut pääsehmään niin onnistuuhan se... Eihän ne sitte voi mithään.”

The irony in the implied author's perspective is directed toward the boys' aggression, their prejudices, and limited worldviews, but at the same time the reader can recognize tones of tenderness and empathy. This becomes more evident when the fair-haired boy sinks deeper into melancholy toward the end of the narrative. His feelings of estrangement stem from homesickness. He counts the remaining days of the trip ("five days still left") and mentions missing the boys back home: "I haven't got used to having a vacation. Even smoking doesn't feel as good as it does with the blokes back home at work" (Ship, 91).<sup>37</sup> The fair-haired boy's voice is filled with repressed emotion before he turns silent and swallows his sadness.

The theme of male bonding appears in "Ship" in a similar context as in "Beer," through the ambivalent relationship between masculine culture and the showing of emotion. At first, the black-haired boy ignores the other boy's emotional agitation, focuses on checking the women on the deck, and takes pictures of the "dull harbour area" (Ship, 91). The adjective *tylsämielinen* ("dull") literally means "dull-minded" in Finnish, which evokes inferences of the person himself being dim-witted. The narrative ends with a scene that emphasizes the distance between the boys. The boys are left standing on the deck: "The bright-haired boy stared at the bluish waves and wiped his nose. The ship went forward in the tender fair wind, passing long, grey storage buildings" (ibid.).<sup>38</sup> The gesture of wiping one's nose contains a hint of the emotional state of the boy who had previously swallowed his tears. Even though the black-haired boy finally expresses some sympathy toward his friend (he slaps him on the shoulder to comfort him), there seems to be some sort of gap in their communication. The black-haired boy's disinterest is manifested in his paying little attention to the other boy's confessions ("Well', said the black-haired boy, not even listening.") He seems to be bored with his friend's constant complaints. This interpretation is supported by the dynamics in the boys' above-cited conversation. Even though the boys seem to agree at first, the last, unnecessarily fully formulated comment by the black-haired boy ("yes, I do know") and the description that his turn is said "emphatically" suggest that he has heard his friend boasting like that before and has grown tired of it. In contrast, the lack of emotional sensitivity and the direct, even rude style of communication between the boys (possible only when being more intimate) can be seen as expressions of the culture of male bonding. There is minimal tolerance for the display of emotions, and the passive boy is given the space needed to control his feelings.

In "Ship," the cultural narratives of Finnish nationality and masculinity are clearly used by Liksom to parody her characters and their lack of cultural competence. At the same time, the behaviorist technique chosen to convey their

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'Sanoiks sie, että takkaapäin... Ei helvetti! Suohraan eestä. Ei mulle ole ennenkään poliisit tulheet vittuiheen, kyllähän sie sen tiät.'

'Joo, tiänhän mie', totesi mustahiuksinen painokkaasti ..."

<sup>37</sup> "Ei sitä meikäläinen ole tottunu lommaihleen. Tupakkakaan ei maistu niin hyväle ko jätkien kanssa töissä..."

<sup>38</sup> "Vaalea tuijotti sinertäviä aaltoja ja pyyhkäisi nenäänsä. Laiva eteni pienessä myötätuulessa kohti harmaita pitkiä varastorakennuksia."

homesickness evokes not only amusement in the audience but also feelings of sympathy. The characters' need for a secure routine and their secret longing for their homeland and their fellow countrymen in the North are juxtaposed with the more cosmopolitan attitudes of the implied author.<sup>39</sup> Liksom's implied author invites the readers to distance themselves from the characters' narrow-mindedness, but at the same time persuades them to share their feelings of longing and belonging.

### 3.2 "Stairs"

The issues of nationality and gender, empathy and antipathy, as well as the contrast between values and multi-voiced narration re-emerge in a more elaborated and nuanced manner in "Stairs." The encounter between a Finnish woman and an African man on foreign terrain, in Russia, is depicted through the eyes of the first person narrator. As the analysis of the characters' meeting at the beginning of the short story has already illustrated, the first person narrator remains relatively objective in her perceptions of the unknown man. At first, she focuses on the "negro's" outer appearances, his facial expressions and gestures, as if observing him from above. She seems rather disinterested in her company at times, concentrating more on the taste of her coffee and pastry: "I stuck my spoon into the mocha pastry [mocha dream] and washed it down with 'milk coffee' with at least three cubes of sugar. The sensation was pretty decent; the taste of the pastry hadn't changed in the past couple of years" (Stairs, 74).<sup>40</sup> Later, the narrator's detailed perceptions of the "negro's" outfit (his plastic sandals and a Hawaiian shirt) are followed by another remark on the coffee's taste: "I sipped my cappuccino. It tasted good" (Stairs, 75).<sup>41</sup>

In the reading of the rhetorical situation of "Stairs," the complex persona of the first person narrator serves as the basis for the reader's ethical positioning. Right from the start, the narrator's way of addressing the man as the "negro," combined with her distanced, ironic, and almost arrogant attitude toward him, challenges the audience's ability to share the narrator's perspective without hesitation. In this respect, her lack of interest or arrogance can be interpreted as an expression of white supremacy: the black man is represented as the more vulnerable and less confident participant in their interaction. The narrator merely observes the "negro's" gestures and embodied behavior, and makes judgments based on them. She also pays attention to his appearance in a manner that seems objectifying: "He [it] shook his head, and the more enthusiastic he

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<sup>39</sup> Liksom is one of the Finnish authors who have used their cosmopolitan lifestyle as a relevant part of their work and public image. Liksom has lived in Moscow and Copenhagen, and has travelled in Siberia, Mongolia, China, and Texas in the United States.

<sup>40</sup> "Iskin lusikkani mokkaunelmaan ja huuhtelin sen alas maitokahvilla, jossa oli ainakin kolme kuutiota sokeria. Makuelämys oli kohtuullinen, leivoksen maku ei ollut kahdessa vuodessa muuttunut."

<sup>41</sup> "Hörppäsin cappuccinoa. Se maistui hyvältä."

became, the faster he talked. He barely had time to take a breath. I lit my cigarette and kept admiring his handsome row of teeth” (Stairs, 78).<sup>42</sup>

The fact that the narrator refrains from an explicit evaluation of the “negro’s” narrative constitutes a seminal aspect in the reading of the story’s rhetorical situation. The “negro’s” self-narrative is a chronological story of his life, beginning with a depiction of his years at an English school somewhere in Africa. During his education he becomes estranged from his family and finally leaves home. The “negro’s” story includes many metacommentaries on the act of telling itself:

“My history is very colorful, and what a gallery of characters,” he continued and got even more excited than before. “Do you know the Kung Sans?” The expression on his face told me that he was certain that I didn’t. “It’s one of the tribes of hunter gatherers in northern Africa?”

I nodded my head. (Stairs, 75)<sup>43</sup>

When the “negro” starts to tell his life history, it becomes apparent that it is full of factual inconsistencies, which means that he might be lying repeatedly. There is no such tribe in the northern part of Africa as the Kung Sans. (The Kung are a San people living in southern Africa.) Other “facts” in the man’s speech also suggest that his colorful history might be, at least partially, of his own invention. When he tells about his new life in New York (where “everything is possible”) he mentions “42nd Avenue”: a street that does not actually exist. Moreover, his talk of learning algebra, trigonometry, and gravitational theory at school and his economics studies in Prague is made to seem dubious by a comment dropped in the middle of the conversation: “I know a lot about world economics.  $E = mc^2$ ” (Stairs, 77).<sup>44</sup> This misplaced reference to Einstein’s equation suggests that the “negro” might not know that much about economics, physics, or mathematics after all.

In addition to the distorted facts in the “negro’s” story, there are plenty of sentimental expressions in his speech. After the narrator, and the reader, are given all of the above-listed misinformation, the sincerity of the “negro’s” emotional confession, too, comes under suspicion. Are these sentimental expressions provided only to invite the listener to empathically engage with the speaker’s position, to make the listener believe in his story or bring more color to it? When talking about his family, the “negro” aims at creating an impression of himself as a proud and reckless young man who has now grown up and has become conscious of the wrong decisions he had made in the past. He has become “a homeless egghead” (“koditon älypää”) who does not fit within the

<sup>42</sup> “Se pyöritteli päätä ympäriinsä, mitä innostuneempi se oli jutuistaan sitä nopeammin se selitti. Tuskin ehti vetää happea välissä. Mä sytyin savukkeen ja ihailin sen komeaa hammasrivistöä.”

<sup>43</sup> “‘Mun historia on tosi värikäs ja mikä henkilögalleria’, se jatkoi ja innostui entisestään. ‘Tiedät sä Kung Sanit?’ Sen ilme piti varmana etten mä tiennyt. ‘Se on yks metsästäjä-keräilijäkansa Pohjois-Afrikassa?’ Nyökkäsin.”

<sup>44</sup> “Mä tiedän maailmantaloudesta kaikenlaista.  $E = mc^2$ .”

community of ordinary people. When talking about his past, he reveals his frustration, as if seeking the narrator's sympathy: "I told everyone to fuck off, *even though I felt damned bad*" (Stairs, 75).<sup>45</sup> The later stages of his life are marked by the same feeling of unhappiness: "I *was already then fucking unhappy*" (ibid.).<sup>46</sup> And there in Moscow, he is lonely among the strangers: "Oh hell, I'm alone here among these Slavs" (ibid.).<sup>47</sup>

Liksom's first person narrator does not reveal her thoughts about the "negro's" account (e.g., whether she believes him or not), which is arguably untypical of a first person narrator. She only nods her head, as if silently agreeing with everything the "negro" is telling her. There are some hints, however, of the narrator perhaps doubting the man's sincerity: "The expression on his face told me that *he was certain that I didn't know*." Such observations give the impression that the narrator is acknowledging potential dishonesty in the man, but she is more interested in the dynamics of the interaction itself. She engages in the "negro's" talk as if watching a performance rather than from the perspective of its content. It seems that the whole situation is a game of a kind, and that the narrator is willingly playing along.

The unreliability of the "negro's" story strongly influences the reader's rhetorical reading of Liksiom's narrative. However, the ethical dimension of the story is even more dependent on the perspective of the first person narrator. She is the one who is giving her account of the events and framing the "negro's" embedded storytelling. Liksiom's short story provides an excellent example of the kind of character narration Phelan calls "restricted narration." This narrative technique approaches unreliable narration in its manner of challenging the audience to interpret and evaluate the narrator's account of facts, events, and characters. And unreliable narration sets up an ethical relationship different from reliable narration.

The classical definition of unreliable narration refers to narrative situations in which the narrator does not speak or act in accordance with the norms of the work. In other words, there is a collision between the values of the narrator and those of the implied author, and this gap is somehow communicated to the reader (Phelan 2005: 33, Booth 1983 : 158-159, 307). A classic example of unreliable narration is a narrative "mediated" by a first person narrator who is also the protagonist of her or his story. Not all character narrators, however, are unreliable. What is more, the degrees of potential unreliability are dependent on the narrator's qualities as a person on the one hand, and her or his abilities to perceive and report accurately on the other. Some first person narrators are (epistemologically) fallible rather than (morally) untrustworthy (see Nünning's critique on the standard categorizations of unreliability 1999: 56-57). According to Greta Olson (2003: 100-104), readers regard *fallible narrators'* mistakes as situationally motivated. Such narrators do not reliably report on the events

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<sup>45</sup> "Mä haistatin paskat, vaikka minun oli saatanan paha olla."

<sup>46</sup> "Ja olin jo silloin saatanan onneton."

<sup>47</sup> "Mä olen helvetti yksin täällä näiden slabojen keskellä ..."

because they are mistaken about their judgements. *Untrustworthy narrators*, by contrast, are dispositionally unreliable. Their mistakes and inconsistencies are interpreted as behavioral traits or manifestations of their self-interest. Moreover, the different types of unreliability have different consequences for the ethics of the narrative. Phelan (2007: 223), for instance, distinguishes between “estranging unreliability,” which increases the distance between the narrator and the authorial audience, and “bonding unreliability,” which reduces this distance, exposing, for instance, the narrator’s misguided self-deprecation or subjectivity. Despite the narrator’s (moderate) unreliability, she or he may appear immensely appealing to the audience.

In our ethical reading of “Stairs,” the focus is on the use of restricted narration that comes close to both estranging and bonding unreliability. In restricted narration, the implied author typically limits the character narrator’s voice to a mere *reporting* function and excludes her personal opinions and evaluations. The implied author, instead, invites the reader to evaluate the narrator’s reports.<sup>48</sup> In “Stairs,” the character narrator’s act of telling is characterized by the implied author’s technique of “excluding” the first person narrator’s explicit evaluations and comments on the “negro’s” life history. The narrative strategy chosen by Liksom resembles a type of the categories of unreliable narration: underreporting. First, this strategy creates an estranging distance between the first person narrator and the authorial audience. It seems as if the character narrator were deliberately withholding her thoughts about the “negro” and her own intentions. Here we return to the question that arises at the beginning of the characters’ conversation: why does the narrator choose this particular table? And why has she bought two coffees and two pastries, but ends up having both of them in the company of a stranger? Are these facts somehow related to Kolja, the person mentioned in the opening frame of the story? In “Stairs,” the technique of restricted narration clearly serves the purpose of the implied author to communicate some aspects of the characters’ interaction to the authorial audience. The ethical situation of the story becomes more complex when the reader realizes that “the negro” might not be in such a subordinate position as it first appears. This realization closes the emotional and ethical gap between the character narrator and the authorial audience, and makes the story’s bonding effect stronger.

First of all, in addition to the “negro’s” tendency to lie or exaggerate, he also possesses a rather arrogant attitude toward the character narrator. Curiously enough, this cockiness resembles the first person narrator’s own emotional distance from the “negro” at the beginning of the narrative. The rhetorical reading of the story is interconnected with ethical dimensions related not only to

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<sup>48</sup> In his broader definition of restricted narration, Phelan (2005: 80) describes the technique as being “marked by an implied author’s limiting the narrator to only one axis of communication while requiring the authorial audience to make inferences about communication along at least one of the other axes as well.” The axes of communication refer to the different categories of unreliable narration classified by Phelan. They include unreliable reporting (occurring along the axis of characters, facts and events), unreliable reading or interpreting (occurring along the axis of knowledge and perception), and unreliable regarding or evaluating (occurring along the axis of ethics and evaluation).

race and nationality, but also gender. There is no actual reference to the gender of the first person narrator in the text.<sup>49</sup> Only the following depiction of the “negro’s” body language in the later part of the narrative reveals that he is talking to a woman: “Good salary, flexible working hours and lots of stark-naked ladies with good bodies around (...) He kept smirking and *measuring my chest with his eyes*” (Stairs, 78; emphasis added).<sup>50</sup> The “negro’s” womanizing gaze is followed by his commentary on the appearance of Russian women:

“(...) and the ladies, they are like Mother Geese.” He kept smirking and nodded his head toward the plump women. I smiled at New York, Moscow, him, and myself. He let his gaze drop and stared at his glass of orange juice and kept licking his lips. His face was round, and his hair short under the national cap. He looked like the negro boy printed on the licorice candy bar, the one with the red hat. (Stairs, 76-77)<sup>51</sup>

Strangely, the “negro’s” stare and vulgar talk seem to amuse the character narrator rather than offend her. Her smile makes the “negro” lower his eyes, which indicates that he is somehow unable to face her gaze in turn. The first person narrator’s open gaze, following the “negro’s” commentary on women, indicates that she is extremely aware of the “negro’s” sexual tone of voice. Moreover, the character narrator’s racist commentary on the “negro,” as resembling the stereotypical figure of a black person on a licorice bar makes her own stare appear equally objectifying. The character narrator seems to be identifying herself with the “negro,” seeing similarities between them. The narrator’s comment on the licorice bar resembles her earlier remark on the taste of the coffee and the “mocha dream,” as if their “decent” taste was a reference to the entertaining nature of the “negro’s” performance. Thus, the underlying values in both the character narrator’s commentary and the “negro’s” talk appear problematic. Through the implied author’s communication to the authorial audience, Liksom deliberately builds unconventional positions which show the perplexing relations of power in communications between a white female and a black man. Liksom uses restricted narration to simultaneously evoke in the audience the affective effects of bonding and estranging.

Moreover, in some parts of “Stairs” the implied author’s and character narrator’s perspectives seem almost to succumb to one another. The subsequent comment on the “negro’s” body language generates associations of a more literate tone in the character narrator’s expressions. “Dark” Africa serves as an

<sup>49</sup> In the Finnish language the personal pronoun *hän* (“s/he”) is gender neutral, that is, it is used to refer to both female and male subjects. Moreover, in colloquial Finnish another pronoun, *se* (‘it’), is almost exclusively used as a third person pronoun. Similarly to *hän*, it does not distinguish between male and female. This pronoun is also used in Liksom’s stories, both by the characters and the narrator.

<sup>50</sup> “Hyvä liksa, joustavat työajat ja paljon hyväkroppaisia daameja ympärillä, ilman rihmaakaan...’ Se virnisteli ja mittaili katseellaan minun rinnanympärystä.”

<sup>51</sup> “... ja daamit, nää on ku hanhiemoja.’ Se virnisteli ja vinkkasi päällään viereisen pöydän pönäköitä naisia. Hymyilin New Yorkille, Moskovalle, sille ja itselleni. Se laski katseensa tuoremehulasiin ja nuoleskeli huuliaan. Sen kasvot olivat pyöreät ja hiukset lyhyet kansallislakin alla. Se näytti Pandan lakritsapatukkaan painetulta punalakkiselta neekeripojalta.”

image of the human unconscious (at least from the perspective of a white Westerner): “He smiled and *descended deep into Africa in his thoughts* (Stairs, 74; emphasis added).<sup>52</sup> In her double communication, Liksom develops an interplay between her implied author’s perspective and that of the characters in order to address certain dimensions of human psychology. When telling his life history, the “negro” talks about his experiments with drugs, his phobias, and his hallucinations, which explains his suspicions at the beginning of the conversation (suspecting that the narrator might be a kind of agent or bureaucrat). He talks about having “gone through three psychoanalyses” and of still having problems: fearing people, hallucinating and “sweating like in a rain forest” in his apartment in Moscow. Even though these details are used to construct and parody the “negro’s” colorful persona, more serious issues of human perception, knowledge, and communication are addressed through his talk. The short story itself challenges the idea of reality and truth as something shared by everyone, as a totality of fixed values:

“If you only knew what and how I have lived, then you wouldn’t wonder anything anymore. Come on, look around you, these people here, the Russians – they do not know anything about life. They go to school, to work and they die. They don’t know anything about dimensions ... They think that the world is three-dimensional, but no no ... I say that the world and life are squared in comparison to what ordinary people are imagining in their heads. That’s the truth.” (Stairs, 77)<sup>53</sup>

The implied author’s communication to the authorial audience plays off the standard (stereotypical) descriptions of nationality and gender, which is connected to her aim of avoiding universalizing depictions of human experience. There are as many perspectives on life as there are people experiencing and living it. In the characters’ interaction, there remains the possibility of genuine human contact precisely because of the characters’ ability to see similarities through (and despite) their differences. The narrator’s smile (“I smiled at New York, Moscow, him, and myself”) epitomizes this idea of recognizing and seeing oneself in the other. As the “negro” keeps staring at his glass of orange juice, the reader is able to sense feelings of melancholy and estrangement behind his explicit words. Moreover, the character narrator appears more sympathetic to the reader toward the end of the story. The estranging distance turns into bonding as the narrator’s perspective moves closer to the authorial audience’s.

In dialogues generally, characters sometimes say more than they mean through indirection. Also, just as character narrators may underreport their feelings and intentions, characters in dialogues can understate their true intentions. The reader must work at inferring the underlying meaning of the interactions (cf.

<sup>52</sup> “Se hymyili ja laskeutui ajatuksissaan syvälle Afrikkaan.”

<sup>53</sup> “Jos sä tietäisit, mitä ja miten mä olen elänyt, niin sä et ihmettelis enää mitään. Kato nyt ympärilles, nämä ihmiset tässä, venäläiset – ei ne tiedä elämästä mitään. Ne käy koulunsa, menevät töihin ja kuolevat pois. Ei nää tiedä mitään ulottuvuuksista... Nää kuvittelee, että maailma on kolmiulotteinen, mutta ehei... Mä sanon, että maailma ja elämä on kaksi potenssiin se, mitä tavalliset ihmiset kuvittelee päässään. Se on totuus.”

Phelan 2005: 55). Liksom uses the technique of restricted narration to engage her readers emotionally in the seemingly plain, yet multileveled interaction between her characters. The character narrator and the “negro’s” most genuine emotions are not always represented in their speech, but rather conveyed through various (multimodal) aspects of their communication: silences, bodily gestures, tones of voice, and actions. Further, the fictional setting seems to reflect the melancholy of the characters who inhabit it. The impression of underlying sympathy in the character narrator’s smile, for instance, is reinforced by the closing scene of “Stairs.” The two characters leave the café together, as if sharing the same experience of being lonely strangers in a foreign city: “Midnight’s heavy silence fell upon us and everything felt abandoned and empty. He folded his magazine under his arm and I put the book back into my bag. We descended together into the warm autumn night” (Stairs, 79).<sup>54</sup> The final line of the story captures the character narrator’s perceptions of the “negro” sitting with her in the last tram of the evening. The scene seems to convey the character narrator feeling both peaceful and sad, as they travel together, for a short moment: “He sat in melancholy and looked at the peaceful city outside the window, when the tram’s doors lazily closed and the tram started swaying through its last round” (ibid.).<sup>55</sup>

### 3. Summary and conclusion

In this article, we have examined the dynamics of fictional dialogues and their ethical interpretation in three short stories by the Finnish author Rosa Liksom. We were interested in how resorting mainly to dialogue as a narrative mode works as a way of depicting tension between her characters and between them and the surrounding world and engages the reader in an interpretative process that invites them to understand the story’s logic both within the fictional storyworlds and at the level of communication between the implied author and the authorial audience. The three stories selected are similar in the sense that they all describe a single conversation between two protagonists with minimal orientation on the part of the narrator. This gives precedence to the role of dialogue in the reader’s meaning-making process. This narrative strategy is either restricted or elliptical; in the third story, “Stairs,” the strategy indicates potential unreliability because of the use of restricted character narration.

In our readings of “Ship” and “Beer,” we have shown that by describing the two characters as “boys” and “friends,” the narrator creates the sense of a collective. The actual interaction reveals tensions already existing at the outset or beginning to emerge as the story progresses. In both stories, one boy is depicted as more dominant. This dominant boy’s clear overconfidence, combined with ignorance and prejudice (as in “Ship”) or plain brutal selfishness

<sup>54</sup> “Keskiyön raskas hiljaisuus asettui päällemme ja kaikki tuntui autiolta ja tyhjältä. Se taittoi lehden kainaloonsa ja minä laitoin kirjan takaisin laukkuun. Me laskeuduimme rinnakkain lämpimään syysiltaan.”

<sup>55</sup> “Se istui surumielisenä ja tuijotti ikkunasta rauhallista kaupunkia, kun raitsikan ovet loksahivat laiskasti kiinni ja vaunu aloitti huojuen viimeisen kierroksen.”

(as in “Beer”), is a source of comedy but also alienates both the friend and the reader from the character. In contrast, the reader is invited to sympathize with those characters whose opposing attitudes reflect the perspective of the implied author. In our reading, we showed that by building tensions between the characters and their relationship to the outside world, the implicit author conveys her ethical values without making them explicit.

The reader is also required to assume an active role in the third story, “Stairs,” which depicts a particular situation between two strangers. The interplay between being an outside observer and being observed from outside forms the central dynamics of the story. Liksom highlights this by featuring opposite types of characters, one being a white woman and the other a black man. The narrator is also the protagonist, but equally reluctant to disclose any evaluations of the reported conversation. We showed that while there seems to be a lack of intersubjective understanding in terms of the other’s goals and motivations within the storyworld, this very problem is also present in the narrator’s communication to the narratee, due to the character narrator’s potential unreliability. In each of the stories, the restricted narrative strategies chosen by the author compels the reader to discern all possible hints and implications in the dynamics of the dialogue in order to make sense of or determine the logic behind the stories and the position of the implied author.

Methodically, we hope to have shown the usefulness of combining an approach that draws on the study of everyday conversation with a more literary reading of the ethical situation in stories in relation to the narrative strategies employed. Our study demonstrates that fictional dialogue draws from the conventions and regularities of real-life conversations and can thus be analyzed in relation to them. When interpreting dialogue, however, it is also vital to discuss the role of the narrator and the more general level of communication between the implied author and the authorial audience. Liksom’s stories provide an interesting example of the power of merely “*showing* through dialogue” when it comes to engaging the reader in the interpretative process and evoking his or her emotional and ethical responses.

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