



Linnæus University
Sweden

Independent Project, 15 Credits

Denaturalise and Challenge Heteronormativity in the EFL Classroom

A queer analysis of Nancy Garden's Annie on My Mind and the novel's value in the EFL classroom



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Term: Fall 2019
Subject: English
Level: Bachelor
Course code: 2ENÄ2E*

Abstract

This essay focuses on how heteronormativity is depicted and challenged in Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind*, and the value of using the novel in the Swedish EFL classroom in order to deconstruct and challenge heteronormativity. The point of departure is that dominating discourses produce knowledge and information in favour of heteronormativity, which results in the oppression of other sexualities, but also that normative expectations are limited to their context. This essay shows that by applying a queer perspective on the novel, it is possible to analyse how the author challenges heteronormativity and thereby denaturalise it. Since a queer reading of the novel can pose a challenge to heteronormativity, it is valuable to use *Annie* in the EFL classroom to assist pupils to analyse and question the norms surrounding them. Rather than focusing on how some individuals deviate from the norm, a queer perspective on *Annie* makes it possible to problematise the construction of normalcy.

Key words

Queer theory, queer pedagogy, EFL classroom, upper secondary school, teaching of literature, heteronormativity, performativity, sexuality.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Anna Thyberg, for your kind support during the writing process.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Queer Theory and Queer Pedagogy	5
2.1 Queer Theory.....	5
2.2 Queer Pedagogy and Literature in the EFL classroom.....	11
3. Garden's <i>Annie on My Mind</i>	17
3.1 A Queer Perspective on <i>Annie on My Mind</i>	17
3.2 Queer Pedagogy and <i>Annie on My Mind</i> in the EFL classroom	28
4. Conclusion.....	32
Works Cited	36

1. Introduction

When Nancy Garden published her ground-breaking novel *Annie on My Mind* in 1982, she provided the first lesbian love story with a happy ending within young adult fiction (Cart and Jenkins 136-37). Through the eyes of the protagonist and narrator Liza Winthrop, Garden shares with the reader the external and internal struggle of a young lesbian girl in New York City during the 1980s. Not only does the surrounding society pose a challenge to the romance between Liza and her first love, Annie Kenyon, but Liza also struggles with how to accept and understand that her desires contradict all she has ever known about love. The novel shows the reader how heteronormativity influences societies and people's minds, and the conflicts that arise when someone finds themselves in disagreement with these normative expectations. However, by enlightening the reader about the limits of heteronormativity, the novel invites the reader to analyse and question the norms governing gender and sexuality.

The potential of the novel to support queer teenagers and to present an alternative love story has been examined in earlier research. Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins argue that by reading *Annie*, generations of queer teenagers “have discovered themselves and the truth about homosexuality” (56). This aspect, to be represented by the characters in books, is crucial for young adults who otherwise are invisible in society since it can provide comfort and inform queer teenagers that they are not alone (1). In “‘Bridge’ Texts: The Rhetoric of Persuasion in American Children’s Realist and Historical Fiction,” Leona Fisher argues that *Annie* functions as a “bridge text,” as the novel has potential to defamiliarize normative expectations and move the reader towards an understanding of what was earlier unfamiliar (130, 133). While the novel uses certain stereotypes and clichés regarding homosexuality which risk reinforcing prejudice, the novel also challenges these stereotypes and clichés since the protagonist, Liza, herself once believed in these but has to re-examine them as she falls in love with Annie (Fisher 133). Fisher

further argues that because the novel's schema parallels with a so-called "heterosexual romance," it moves towards "naturalising" the love between the two girls and therefore, the novel presents an alternative experience (Fisher 133).

While earlier studies have focused on how *Annie* can support queer teenagers and how the novel presents an alternative love story, the aim of this essay is to analyse how the novel challenges the heterosexual discourse in society, and how this, in turn, makes the novel valuable for the teaching of literature in the EFL classroom. Since queer theory exposes normative expectations and the oppression such norms cause, it will be applied in order to analyse how the novel reveals both the oppression caused by heteronormativity, and how heteronormativity is challenged. According to Judith Butler, sexuality and gender are constructed through performativity. In *Bodies that Matter*, she writes that performativity is constrained by norms and culture, and becomes fundamental for what is possible, but also unthinkable to desire (94-5). Furthermore, through gender performativity, gender identities are naturalised (*Gender* xv), and within a binary system of compulsory heterosexuality which Butler calls *the heterosexual matrix*, these identities are controlled and operationalised (*Gender* 150, 208). However, Butler argues that since gender is a result of norms within a certain culture, it could have been constructed differently (*Gender* xxiii-xxiv).

Furthermore, to develop pupils' awareness of the construction of norms, and how heteronormativity influences people's minds and societies, are supported in the syllabus for the courses English 5 and 6. According to the syllabus, values, social issues and cultural conditions should be integrated into the teaching situation (Natl. Ag. f. Ed.), which includes issues such as gender and sexuality. In addition, enhancing pupils' knowledge and understandings of gender and sexuality is also supported in the documents of the sex education, according to which the pupils should be provided with knowledge about how norms regarding gender and

sexuality impact societies and people's lives (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 6). Moreover, since the novel was published in 1982, using the novel in the EFL classroom also provides the pupils with a historical perspective that exposes how norms have changed since the novel was published, which further emphasises how norms are unstable, changeable social and cultural constructs. Thus, this essay argues that Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* challenges heteronormativity by exposing *how* it manages to influence individuals and societies, but also by showing how the characters challenge this discourse. While the heterosexual matrix limits the characters' lives, the novel also shows the faults of the heteronormative discourse by addressing how norms regarding sexuality are limited to their context and constantly change. In turn, the novel could be a valuable resource for the teaching of literature in the EFL classroom since it has potential to allow pupils to analyse the construction of norms regarding gender and sexuality.

2. Queer Theory and Queer Pedagogy

In this section, the theoretical and pedagogical aspects that are used in the analysis are presented. The first subsection includes an explanation of queer theory and the tools that are applied in the literary analysis. In the second part, queer theory and *Annie* are considered from a pedagogical perspective.

2.1 Queer Theory

While the exact definition of *queer* is controversial, most scholars agree that queer somehow questions how dominating discourses organise and categorise genders and sexualities. According to Tamsin Spargo, "'queer' can function as a noun, an adjective or a verb, but in each case is defined against the 'normal' or normalising" (8-9). Suzanna Danuta Walters states that the term "queer" is vague (6) and "the minute you say 'queer' you are necessarily calling into question exactly what you mean when you say it" (7). Moreover,

Alexander Doty writes that according to Butler and Sue-Ellen Case, queerness is something beyond gender: “It is an attitude, a way of responding, that begins in a place not concerned with, or limited by, notions of a binary opposition of male and female or the homo versus hetero paradigm usually articulated as an extension of this gender binarism” (Doty xv). However, while Walters argues that this definition blames feminists and homosexuals for creating this binary (13), Marla Morris questions what “beyond gender” actually means and if it would not be more accurate to first understand the problematics of gender if we intend to move beyond it (228). Morris’ definition of queerness contains three ingredients:

- (a) Queerness as a subject position digresses from normalized, rigid identities that adhere to the sex=gender paradigm;
 - (b) Queerness as a politic challenges the status quo, does not simply tolerate it, and does not stand for assimilation into the mainstream;
 - (c) Queerness as an aesthetic or sensibility reads and interprets texts (art, music, literature) as potentially politically radical. A radical politic moves to the left, challenging norms.
- (228)

Rather than ignoring or going beyond gender, queer seems to challenge the normalisation of gender identities within a heteronormative discourse. Also, while Walters is concerned that Butler’s argument blames homosexuals for creating a binary, Butler actually claims that heterosexuality depends on homosexuality in order to maintain its status as a “distinct social form” (*Gender* 104). Hence, rather than blaming homosexuals, Butler states that heterosexuality requires homosexuality to exist, not as an equally accepted sexuality, but as a repressed and “culturally unintelligible” sexuality (104).

Butler’s explanation of how heterosexuality requires homosexuality to remain as a minority within this binary system emphasises the necessity to challenge the construction of the system as a whole. According to Steven Seidman, normalisation of homosexuality would

not challenge the system, but rather reinforce heteronormativity as homosexuality and heterosexuality would still exist as two distinct categories of sexual and social identity. Rather than considering different sexualities as social statuses, queer theory thinks of them as “categories of knowledge: a language that frames what we know as bodies, desires, sexualities, identities; this is a normative language that erects moral boundaries and political hierarchies” (174). As a result, queer theory proposes to examine how the sexual knowledge produced by institutions and discourses influences social norms and repress differences (174). Thus, as Susanne Luhmann argues, rather than trying to achieve status of normalcy for homosexuals, queer theory intends to undermine the concept of “normalcy” and questions the process in which certain subjects are categorised as normal and some as abnormal (124). Therefore, the challenge is not to reach normalcy for any sexuality, but to change focus to the creation of normalcy and how it can be contested. The notion of queer theory addressing how discourses and institutions produce knowledge about sexualities and the construction of normalcy will be applied in the analysis to reveal the influence of such discourses. Hence, rather than focusing on how homosexuality is a minority, the focus is on the dominating discourse within the novel.

In order to explain the naturalisation of sex, gender and desires within a heteronormative discourse, Butler uses the concept *heterosexual matrix*. The heterosexual matrix requires “a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (*Gender* 208). Within the heterosexual matrix these sexes and genders are naturalised in order to make the matrix invisible and protect it from critique (150). However, sex does not determine neither gender nor desires and as Morris argues, the idea that sex equals gender only functions as a reason to control and reduce humans into two the distinct categories of male and female (229). Similarly, gender identity does not

always determine sexual desire in accordance with heterosexuality, as the existence of homosexual and bisexual desires proves (Butler *Gender* 185), but in order to denaturalise the heterosexual matrix, it is, according to Butler, necessary to understand the complex relation between the two. In *Bodies that Matter*, she explains, “if to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man, and if to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence of a masculine identification, whatever that is, then the heterosexual matrix proves to be an *imaginary* logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability” (239). Therefore, the heterosexual matrix’s control of gender is precisely what makes it illogic when sexual desire does not follow gender identity.

Moreover, the occurrence of homophobia further emphasises the necessity to understand how gender is constructed and how sexual desire is involved in this construction, since, as Butler writes, homophobic conceptions are often based on the notion that someone failed to do their gender right, i.e. in accordance with heteronormative expectations (*Bodies* 238). Butler’s theory on gender performativity is based on the idea that gender is something we create through our actions and behaviours. However, performativity is “not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (*Gender* xv). Thus, performativity is a repetition of actions and behaviours that are influenced by surrounding norms, and results in naturalisation of certain genders, and “the disciplinary production of gender effects as a false stabilization of gender in the interest of heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain” (*Gender* 184-85). As a result, performance is “a strategy of survival within compulsory systems” (190). Those who fail to adapt to the expected relationship between sex, gender and desires within the heterosexual matrix and do their gender wrong, are punished and considered as “developmental failures or

logical impossibilities” (190, 24). The regulation of gender performativity within a heteronormative discourse emphasises the importance of Morris’ argument to understand the problematics of gender instead of moving beyond it (228). If gender performances that deviate from the heterosexual matrix are considered “developmental failures” and result in homophobia, taking into consideration the construction of gender is crucial to understand oppression of sexualities.

It is important to keep in mind that gender performativity should not be misinterpreted as a choice or a free act. Rather, sustained gender performance is a result of the notion that it is natural:

the tactic collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (Butler *Gender* 190)

Hence, continued performance in accordance with the heterosexual matrix and the punishing of performances that deviate from it is based on beliefs that it is natural. However, the term “natural” is controversial since nature itself is a social construct. Donald E. Hall argues that when a medieval homosexual man was accused of defying nature, he was actually committing a crime against the church and the state. “Nature” is determined by contemporary politics (101-2). Therefore, if nature is a social construct, what is considered as natural is limited to its context. Moreover, Butler explains that the normative and naturalised gender reality is called into question when drag performances occur (*Gender* xxiii-xxv). Drag performances expose the performative nature of gender by imitating the structures that the heterosexual project claims are natural (*Bodies* 125). Hence, nature and gender are never fundamental truths, but rather determined by authorities and prevalent norms.

The concept of the heterosexual matrix will be applied in the present study to examine how it influences individuals and societies as it is depicted in the novel, and how the characters challenge the matrix. Furthermore, gender performativity and the notion of nature will be used to analyse how the characters are influenced by and challenge the gender performativity that is considered as natural, i.e. when they either through their thoughts or actions show evidence of the faults of the gender performativity that is considered as natural. Butler's illustration of drag will not be examined, but rather the potential to challenge the gender performativity within the binary system with regards to sexual desires.

Moreover, a historical perspective on the view on sexuality can support a destabilisation of the idea of so-called natural sexualities. Hall writes that there is no doubt that queers who challenge the heteronormative expectations on love have always existed, but to what extent same-sex interactions have been tolerated or condemned, has varied throughout history (96). He further explains that the fact that homosexual acts were widely accepted and even "naturalised" during the Classical Greek era points towards the necessity to consider how sexual identities are categorised today (100). In Plato's *Symposium*, Plato presents a statement of Aristophanes:

Aristophanes theorises that the world was once made up of conjoined beings, some of mixed sex, other of two men or two women. When Zeus divided these conjoined beings into separate individuals, sexuality was determined by the search for one's missing half, either of the same or different sex. (qtd. in Hall 101)

While some queer theorists question this metaphysically determined interpretation of sexuality, Hall claims that it is relevant to current discussions of the naturalisation of certain identities (101). Since the heterosexual matrix stays intact and protected from critique due to the naturalisation of the sex / gender paradigm and the practice of heterosexual desire (Butler

Gender 150, 208), the notion of that gender and sexuality were naturalised differently during the Greek era, poses a challenge to the heterosexual matrix. As Hall argues, the fact that homosexual acts were naturalised during this era encourages us to consider how the current system of organising sexual relationships is limited to its context as well (100). Thus, neither our current society nor the view of sexuality during the Greek era are essential truths, but rather, cultural constructs.

However, a historical perspective is also important to consider in order to understand how normative expectations from the past still influence us today (Hall 97-98). According to Michael Foucault, what is currently normative is influenced by values of the Victorian era. In accordance with the Victorian values, sexuality is tied to the married couple and the function of sex is mainly reproduction. However, it was known that so called illegal sexualities existed, but they were restricted to brothels and mental hospitals (Foucault 3-4). Hall argues that Foucault's statement regarding the influence of Victorian values is crucial as they still influence categorisation of identities (104). As a result, taking history into consideration can support one's understanding of the roots of normative expectations in contemporary society. A historical perspective on norms regarding sexuality will be applied in the present study in order to analyse ongoing changes within the novel, but also how the novel itself deals with a historical view on sexuality.

2.2 Queer Pedagogy and Literature in the EFL classroom

Introducing queer theory into the teaching situation is an essential endeavour as it can both contribute with a critical perspective on dominating discourse and create a safer school environment. According to Joao Nemi Neto, "queer pedagogy offers a critical view of the practices of exclusion that are naturalized in the classroom by a banal heteronormativity that makes all those who don't fit into a certain standard invisible" (591). In a pedagogical context,

such an approach is important since, in accordance with the curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden, no one in school should be exposed to discrimination based on gender or sexuality (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. "Curriculum" 4).

Annie was chosen as a primary source since the novel poses a challenge to dominating discourses and to analyse the novel with the purpose to expose the limits of heteronormativity, is supported in the syllabus for English 5 and 6. According to the syllabus, in these two courses the teaching of English should develop pupils understanding of values, social issues and cultural conditions (Natl. Ag. f. Ed.). However, it can be a complex endeavour for upper secondary school pupils to comprehend the function of dominating discourses and the construction of normalcy, but since *Annie* has a simple, but also authentic, language, the important themes of the novel are available for a wide range of pupils. Analysing novels, such as *Annie*, for this purpose is also beneficial, since, as Jelena Bobkina and Svetlana Stefanova write, analysis of literature can help students to understand the surrounding world (677), and norms governing sexuality constantly surround the pupils in their everyday lives.

Moreover, it is, as Guy Bland argues, important that students experience that the themes and narratives of literature make it possible for them to make text-to-self connections (21) and even if *Annie* was published in 1982, the novel contains several aspects that are relevant to the pupils' lives. For example, the pupils can probably relate to the high school experience, friendship and family relations. Furthermore, the novel is set in New York City, and the depiction of the interesting experience of growing up there can also be a motivational factor. In addition, the romance between Liza and Annie is one of the main reasons why present readers still find the book appealing. As Cart and Jenkins write, they have given "so much attention to describing the evolution – and complex nature – of the relationship between Liza and Annie because most readers find it the most enduringly important aspect of the book" (55).

Also, in an email to Cart, Garden writes that “It’s the emotional content of *Annie* that still speaks to readers” (55). Thus, even though the novel was published almost 40 years ago, it still contains aspects pupils can identify with.

Furthermore, the historical perspective that the novel provides can be advantageous to support pupils’ understanding of the function of norms. Teachers are, in accordance with the aims of the subject integrated sex education, expected to include norms regarding gender and sexuality in their teaching:

to give the pupils perspective and knowledge, get them to see context and realise how the view of gender equality, sexuality and relationships has an impact on entire societies and peoples’ life chances, while making them aware of the norms and values that affect individuals and groups in society. (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. “Sex Ed.” 6)

Making pupils aware about norms also includes the characteristics of these, i.e. that they are unstable and changeable, and as Hall argues, in order to comprehend the normative expectations in our society today, it is important to grasp how these expectations have changed over time (97-98). Because the situation for homosexuals in the US has improved since the novel was published, for example, gay marriage was legalised in all 50 states in 2015 (“Brief”), some of the events in the novel that address homophobia might seem dated to present readers. However, *Annie* reminds the reader that norms governing sexuality constantly change and that norms from the past still influence contemporary society since heterosexuality is still the norm.

While integrating a queer perspective into the teaching situation is appealing, it also poses challenges. According to Kirsten Helmer, the inclusion of marginalised groups into the curriculum is not enough in order to combat homophobia and heteronormativity (902-3). Teaching about the so-called Other will not necessarily accomplish this goal since, as Kevin Kumashiro argues, the Other might still be portrayed as different from the norm (42). Rather

than understanding the Other, queer theory intends to understand the norm, and the goal is to denaturalise the normative expectations that are governing genders and sexualities (Helmer 904). However, providing pupils with knowledge about the Other still constitutes a crucial step towards combating homophobia. Even though knowledge about the Other can never be complete or considered to tell the whole truth (since that would require a clear and exclusive category), it can disrupt harmful knowledge (Kumashiro 42-43). Accordingly, knowledge about a marginalised group, such as homosexuals, can help to disrupt harmful knowledge, such as stereotypes. Still, disruptive knowledge should not be a goal in itself, but a step towards learning more (Kumashiro 42-43). Moreover, while the present study focuses on the norm and not the Other, harmful knowledge is often a consequence of heteronormativity, which makes it relevant to address how the novel challenges heteronormativity both by deconstructing it and by providing disruptive knowledge.

Moreover, in order to challenge heteronormativity in the classroom, it is favourable to focus on how oppressive structures are constructed rather than focusing on how the Other deviates from the norm. As Kumashiro writes, oppression is not only a consequence of the marginalisation of the Other, but also due to “privileging of the ‘normal’” (37). This emphasises the necessity to focus on how heteronormativity is constructed. In fact, Richard Zeikowitz argues that teachers risk reinforcing heteronormativity when they fail to address that what is considered as normal is a social construct (68). Thus, inviting the pupils to analyse the normalisation of heterosexuality and how it manages to maintain its status as natural or normal can be beneficial in order to help them challenge these norms.

By analysing how dominating discourses oppress queers in literary texts, pupils can increase their understanding of how these discourses oppress individuals in contemporary society. Winans writes that in order to cause change, the values students interact with in their

everyday lives and how these operate should be considered and explored to challenge what is otherwise unquestioned (104-5). This can be achieved by analysing normative expectations in literary texts. Zeikowitz explains that when students analyse oppression of queers in medieval texts, they must investigate how cultural codes create normalcy and marginalise queers. He further argues that to achieve this, references to current cultural codes are necessary, which can further support the students to understand such constructions in their own society and their own contributions to the oppression many queers experience (Zeikowitz 68-69). However, asking pupils to consider how they might be complicit in the oppression of queers, risks positioning them as homophobic, which is problematic according to Helmer as it can result in homophobic or heteronormative readings of LGBTQ – themed texts (903). Still, it is possible to connect and compare oppression in texts to oppression in the pupils' surrounding, without engaging in discussions regarding individuals' contributions to such oppression. Furthermore, even though *Annie* is not a medieval text, the novel is set in a different cultural context, and the pupils will need to consider this to grasp the normative discourse in the text.

Moreover, while Judith Hebb, similarly to Bland, Winans and Zeikowitz, emphasises the benefits of connecting the classroom content to students' lives, she also points out that the social act of reading is important for students', and especially reluctant readers', motivation. She explains that one of the main aspects that can support reluctant readers' motivation is the feeling of belonging to a social context (Hebb 22-23). In her continued discussion, Hebb emphasises the necessity of understanding that the meaning of a text is a result of the interaction between the reader, the text and the social context (23). In addition, Helmer writes that classroom discussions can be beneficial when analysing queer literature. When she examined how queer texts have been introduced into the classroom, she noticed that students' understandings of queer sometimes were insufficient because their ideas remained hidden in

their reading journals (Helmer 913). Thus, classroom discussions regarding literary texts can be advantageous both in terms of pupils' motivation, and their possibility to challenge heteronormativity. However, even though the pupils' thoughts should not only be written down in their individual texts, it is, as Hebb argues, beneficial if the reading process includes both individual reflections and group discussions (23).

The possibility to combat homophobia and increase young peoples' understanding of how normalcy is constructed is desirable, but the extent of success is also dependent on the context of teaching. Luhmann writes that "even in designated queer studies classrooms heterosexism and homophobia reemerge and threaten to overwhelm queer subjects" (125). In Swedish schools, such oppression is unfortunately present and impact pupils' lives. In a survey conducted in 2012, as much as 70 percent of the homosexuals and bisexuals consulted answered that they continuously were exposed to derogatory terms during their school days because of their sexuality (Bränström 28). Also, Zeikowitz acknowledges that some scholars fear that students will be resistant to change their current views. However, he believes that if they can understand that their beliefs are based on norms produced by dominating discourses and not the characteristics of the Other, the students might start to change their current ideas (69-70). Thus, even though introducing a queer perspective in the EFL classroom might not cause a fundamental change directly, it can encourage pupils to begin to change their views.

In addition, the multicultural context of the classroom can also influence the possibility to integrate a queer perspective successfully. Pupils from different countries and cultures will possess different knowledge and experiences. As Hall argues, views on sexuality are not cross cultural. The sight of two men holding hands in Los Angeles will probably be interpreted as if they are romantically involved, while a similar occurrence in rural Congo would not result in

such a conclusion (Hall 99). Therefore, it can be necessary to consider the multicultural context when introducing *Annie* and a queer perspective in the EFL classroom.

3. Garden's *Annie on My Mind*

In the following section, an analysis of *Annie* and the pedagogical implications of introducing the novel into the Swedish EFL classroom will be presented. *Annie* is first analysed with a queer perspective. The literary analysis is followed by a pedagogical section that concerns the possibilities and challenges of introducing *Annie* and a queer perspective into the teaching situation.

3.1 A Queer Perspective on *Annie on My Mind*

The part of New York City that the protagonist Liza Winthrop lives in is a society dominated by compulsory heterosexuality and the strong influence this society has on her initially makes it impossible for her to acknowledge her sexuality. As she falls in love with Annie, she continuously fails to grasp what it means. For example, when her mother leaves a note regarding that Annie has called her, Liza feels her heart beating faster but “didn’t know why” (32). Similarly, when buying a present to Annie, rather than considering it as a sign of her attraction to Annie, Liza thinks of it as a thank you present, even though she admits “thank you for what, I didn’t really know” (81). Here, Garden illustrates how difficult it is to question the expected gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix. The naturalisation of gender and desires within the heterosexual matrix has made it invisible and thus, protected from critique (Butler *Gender* 150). Because the heterosexual matrix functions as an invisible norm within the novel, it prevents Liza from understanding her feelings for Annie since the sense that the heterosexual matrix is natural is so strong that any other option is unthinkable. Even if she admits that she would never dare to tell most people that she “brought Annie a present”

(83), which actually indicates that she fears the consequences of not adapting to the heterosexual matrix, she still does not acknowledge that she is falling in love.

When applying a queer perspective, it is evident that Liza's struggle to realise her own feelings is partly a result of a dominating discourse creation of stereotypes, which have provided her with an uninformed idea of what it means to be homosexual. The moment when Liza realises that her teachers Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer are a couple, she also understands that the reason why she has never acknowledged this earlier is because the only indications of them being gay that she could think of "were clichés that didn't apply to them, like acting masculine, or not getting along with men, or making teacher's pets of girls" (153). Thus, the information available had made Liza believe in a very stereotypical and exclusive understanding of homosexuality. The characteristics of the stereotype that lesbians must be masculine is shaped by heterosexual notions of desire. This shows the necessity of, as Morris writes, figuring out the problematics of gender (228), since the idea that a woman needs to behave masculine in order to desire a woman is based on the relationship between gender and sexuality within the heterosexual matrix, i.e. that feminine must desire masculine (Butler *Gender* 208). Of course, a woman can desire a masculine woman. However, Garden educates the reader when she shows that the idea that this applies to all lesbians is a stereotype, clearly influenced by the heterosexual matrix.

The expectations on gender within a heteronormative discourse are also noticeable during the hearing that has been arranged at Foster, the private independent school that Liza attends, to decide whether Liza should be expelled or not due to her sexuality:

Mom had made me wear a dress, and had tried to get my hair to stay in place by making me use conditioner, which I'd never done before, so I didn't even smell like myself, at

least my hair didn't. Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer were wearing dresses, too, but at least they did most of the time – skirts, anyway. But it did occur to me that it was as if all three of us were trying to say, "See – we're women. We wear dresses." Oh, God, how ridiculous! (199)

Liza's mother believes that it will be beneficial for Liza if it seems as if she is behaving in accordance with the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix requires a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (Butler *Gender* 208), and by showing that Liza pays attention to her looks and wears dresses, Liza's mother is trying to make the impression that Liza is acting in accordance with the feminine gender performativity expected of her sex. Thus, it would come across as if she is well adjusted to the heterosexual matrix as she is clearly expressing a feminine identity, which means that she cannot be gay. However, by pointing out that this is ridiculous, Garden makes clear to the reader that gender norms do not signify any truths regarding one's actual desires. Rather, they are a result of gender performativity in favour of heterosexuality.

Moreover, the novel also contains two other examples that are products of the belief that the heterosexual matrix and its required gender performativity is natural. When Mrs. Poindexter, the headmistress of Foster, finds out about Liza's and Annie's romance, she asks Liza how she could go so wrong when "this school has nurtured you since you were a tiny child" (181). The idea that upbringing, and in this case, upbringing that did not have the expected effect, would cause a certain sexuality is a result of the naturalisation of the heterosexual matrix. In accordance with the heterosexual matrix, those who do their gender wrong are "developmental failures or logical impossibilities" (Butler *Gender* 24). Thus, this indicates that one could only be homosexual if something, for example the upbringing, went wrong. Also, the idea that Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer influenced Liza to be gay (184,

211), is another example based on this logic. Similar to the notion that one's upbringing would influence sexuality, is the idea that some outer force must influence one in order to become homosexual a result of that heterosexuality is considered the so-called natural option. However, it is obvious to the reader that Liza is not under influence of the teachers, as she finds out about them after falling in love with Annie (153).

Consequently, the stereotypes and ideas created by a dominating discourse in addition to Liza's struggle to acknowledge and accept her feelings, are relevant to Seidman's argument regarding the importance of focusing on how the knowledge produced by institutions and discourses influences social norms and repress differences (174). Liza's difficulties to acknowledge her sexuality are probably, in addition to the naturalisation of heterosexuality, a result of the problematic representation of homosexuals. This problematic representation is further addressed when Liza expresses that the information about homosexuality that she finds in an encyclopaedia, does not apply to her:

that didn't tell me much about any of the things I felt. What struck me most, though, was that, in that whole long article, the word "love" wasn't used even once. That made me mad; it was as if whoever wrote the article didn't know that gay people actually love each other (143).

Liza's reaction to the encyclopaedia reveals that this institutional practice of producing information oppresses homosexuality. By denying that homosexuality is connected to love, heterosexuality maintains its status as the norm, while homosexuality can be condemned as a carnal desire rather than true love. Another example of institutional practice in favour of a heteronormative discourse within the novel is the idea that homosexuals cannot be happy. Liza's father, George, who is very clear with that he is not homophobic, fears that a homosexual relationship will ruin Liza's possibility to a happy life as she will not have "a husband and

children” (191). Similarly, her classmate Sally Jarrell says, “it just ruins people for – for getting married and having kids and having a normal, healthy sex life – and for just plain being happy and well-adjusted” (221-222). George’s and Sally’s statements seem to mirror the narrow-minded expectations on homosexual relationship in the US at the time when *Annie* was published. According to Garden, one reason why novels addressing lesbian love prior to *Annie* did not have a happy ending is because an unhappy ending was necessary for the possibility to get a novel published (Horning 253). By regulating information in such way, heterosexuality maintains its monopoly on happy love stories which is noticeable in the novel since George and Sally insist that Liza will not be happy with a woman.

By showing how the regulation of knowledge and information results in an uninformed understanding of homosexuality, *Annie* addresses Luhmann’s notion of how certain subjects are categorised as normal and some as abnormal (124). Clearly, the information available about homosexuality is not representative, as it causes repression and stereotypes in favour of a heteronormative discourse. By categorising homosexuality in terms of stereotypes, denying its relation to love and that it can lead to happiness, heteronormativity makes it possible for heterosexuality to, as Butler describes it, maintain its status as a “distinct social form” (*Gender* 104), while homosexuality becomes a “culturally unintelligible” sexuality (*Gender* 104). However, by exposing how heteronormativity operates, *Annie* makes it possible for the reader to question its dominance as it is clear that the imbalance of power is not an essential truth, but a result of regulation of information and knowledge, and thus, a cultural construct. Therefore, when Liza and Annie finally read literature that contains lesbian love stories, which Liza argues increase their understanding of themselves and makes Liza feel “calmer inside, more complete and sure about myself” (144), it should not be considered as a strategy to normalise homosexuality, as Seidman argues it would reinforce heteronormativity (174). Rather,

Garden's description of the effect the content has on the girls' understanding of their sexuality criticises how the dominating discourse fails to produce a representative understanding of homosexuality and indicates that the contemporary knowledge could have been constructed differently if more voices were involved in the process.

However, as Liza's feelings develop, she also begins to challenge the heterosexual matrix and the gender performance it requires:

It was true I'd never consciously thought about being gay. But it also seemed true that if I were, that might pull together not only what had been happening between me and Annie all along and how I felt about her, but also a lot of things in my life before I'd known her – things I'd never let myself think about much. Even when I was little I'd often felt as if I didn't quite fit in with most of the people around me; I'd felt isolated in some way that I never understood. And as I got older – well in the last two or three years, I'd wondered why I'd rather go to the movies with Sally or some other girl than with a boy, and why, when I imagined living with someone someday, permanently I mean, that person was always female. (105)

Liza's rethinking of these feelings poses a challenge to the matrix. As Butler writes, the heterosexual matrix is proven illogic "if to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man" (*Bodies* 239), and to Liza, even if she is trying not to think of it, it is not logic to desire a man. Liza's confession of her feelings reveals that the heterosexual matrix and the performativity it requires is only a social force that causes people to repress their feelings. Moreover, by telling the reader about Liza's initial inability to understand her own feelings, but also her rethinking of things she has felt her whole life, Garden speaks to the queer reader. She shows that one's confusion is a result of what a dominating discourse causes us to think,

and what one actually feels is love, even though such thought has been compromised in favour of heteronormativity.

Furthermore, *Annie* also challenges the heterosexual matrix when the novel points the reader's attention towards what is natural. When Liza kisses Annie for the first time, the term natural is problematised:

It was like a war inside me; I couldn't even recognise all the sides. There was one that said, "No, this is wrong: you know it's wrong and bad and sinful," and there was another side that said, "Nothing has ever felt so right and natural and true and good," and another that said it was happening too fast, and another that just wanted to stop thinking all together and fling my arms around Annie and hold her forever. There were other sides too, but I couldn't sort them out. (93)

The internal conflict Liza is experiencing can be interpreted as a conflict between *two* sides: what she experiences is natural and right, and what she has been taught is natural and right. The idea that her sexuality should be sinful is a result of the naturalisation of heterosexuality within a heteronormative discourse. According to Butler, the reason for sustained performance in favour of heterosexuality is due to that the collective agreement to perform and produce genders are protected by cultural values and this, in addition to the punishment for those who do not adapt to the genders produced through performativity, makes us believe it is natural (*Gender* 190). The "side" within Liza that expresses that homosexuality is sinful is thus related to the notion that punishment is applicable when one does not agree with the performance expected of them, which strengthens the sense that heterosexuality is natural. When Liza then argues that she feels that her love for Annie is natural, she challenges the heterosexual matrix and its claim to be natural and invites the reader to consider what "natural" actually means.

The problematics of “natural” is further addressed when Ms. Baxter and Sally find Liza and Annie at Ms. Stevenson’s and Ms. Widmer’s house and realise that the two girls have made love. To condemn their actions, Ms. Baxter makes references to the Bible:

“I almost wish I had found some young men,” she said. “Sodom and Gomorrah are all around us, Sally.” She looked with growing disgust at me. “We must face the truth. There is ugliness and sin and self-indulgence in this house – as I have long feared. And to think,” she said, regarding me as if I were a toad, “that the president of the student council is a – a . . .” (167)

At this point, Ms. Baxter is both through her words and facial gestures judging Liza and indicates that she considers Liza’s actions to be “developmental failures,” as actions that deviate from heterosexuality are considered to be in accordance with a heterosexualization of desire (Butler *Gender* 24). When she continues, she tells Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer that she has “long feared that the relationship between you two was – is immoral and unnatural” and calls their home a “a place in which to indulge in – in unnatural lusts” (168). By pointing out homosexuality as unnatural, Ms. Baxter is acting in accordance with the heterosexual matrix, since within the matrix, heterosexual desires are natural (Butler *Gender* 150, 190). However, when relying on religion to determine what is natural and not, she draws attention to what nature has to do with religion. According to Hall, such categorisation of nature is a political interest (102). As a result, Ms. Baxter’s reasons for disapproval of homosexuality seem to be limited to a religious setting, which means that it is a cultural construct only applicable within the context where it has been created.

Moreover, Foster is the setting in the novel where the characters enforce the heterosexual matrix the most, and also where the external conflict Liza has to go through is evident. Mrs. Poindexter, who rules the school with an iron hand, is devastated when she finds

out about Liza and Annie. In an outburst, she explains that she understands how appealing sex can be for young people, but she does not understand the appeal of “abnormal sex” (183) and indicates that Liza needs “professional help” (184). Mrs. Poindexter’s behaviour is another example of how performances that do not follow heterosexuality are considered as “developmental failures or logical impossibilities” (Butler *Gender* 24), as she seems to believe that homosexuality is a mental disease that can be cured. Liza also receives this reaction from Sally who tells her that her sexuality is “a mental problem” (222). The idea that homosexuality should be a mental problem can also be connected to institutional practices. The novel is set only nine years after the American Psychiatric Association (APA) acknowledged that homosexuality is not a disease. However, they classified it as a “‘sexual orientation disturbance’ for people ‘in conflict with’ their sexual orientation” until 1987 (Landers and Kapadia 849). Thus, the character’s actions seem to be related to how institutions have classified sexuality. Moreover, similar to the ideas regarding upbringing and influence, is the belief that homosexuality should be a mental problem also a result of that heterosexuality is a so-called natural option.

Furthermore, Mrs. Poindexter’s further actions against the protagonist are very extreme examples of how those who do not follow the heterosexual matrix are punished. She explains to Liza that she must arrange an “expulsion hearing” (183), which might not only result in Liza being expelled, but will also decide whether the incident will appear on her school record (184). In addition, she also makes clear to Liza that she fears this will be a public scandal that can ruin the fund-raising campaign that has been arranged to save the school from closing down (183). Mrs. Poindexter’s treatment of Liza relates to how performance is “a strategy of survival within compulsory systems” (Butler *Gender* 190). By expelling her from school and indicating that the incident will minimise her possibilities to attend university, Mrs. Poindexter is

intending to eliminate Liza's possibilities in life. Similarly, by arguing that it will be a public scandal, she is indicating that Liza's sexuality is not an option if she wishes to survive in the surrounding world.

However, the hearing reveals that Mrs. Poindexter and Ms. Baxter overestimated the influence of their conservative values. The trustees do not agree with Mrs. Poindexter's and Ms. Baxter's accusations against Liza and one of them explains to Mrs. Poindexter that she sees "much more danger of its being publicized as a result of this ridiculously anachronistic hearing than because of the incident itself" (209-10) and she points out that "Most people nowadays are fairly enlightened about homosexuality" (210). However, even though the outcome is in Liza's favour, as she is not expelled and can continue as president of the students' council (214), a remaining problem is that the two teachers are fired due to their sexuality (221). As Hall writes, to what extent same-sex interactions have been tolerated or condemned has varied throughout history (96), and the hearing seems to capture an ongoing societal change. Even though homophobia still is present as the teachers have to leave their jobs, the fact that Liza got away without punishment indicates that norms and values are in motion, which suggests that they are unstable, and changeable.

Moreover, the notion that norms are in motion is noticeable throughout the novel as the description of Foster and Mrs. Poindexter's behaviour conveys the impression that she is trying to run a school based on Victorian values, which is not applicable to the surrounding world. Liza's description of Foster as "an old wooden Victorian mansion, which is exactly what it was before it was made into an independent – private – school" (17-18), and the fact the Mrs. Poindexter kept her office's original furnishing and has "her thick brown drapes partway closed, so it was unusually dark" (27), indicate a willingness to hold on to old values. Also, Mrs. Poindexter governs the school in accordance with strict rules, educates students about

morality, and implements a zero tolerance of sexual activity outside of marriage (29, 182, 134). The description of the school and Mrs. Poindexter's behaviour draw attention to Victorian values, and Foucault's argument that the Victorian view on sexuality, which was that sex was limited to the married couple, is still evident (3-4). Even though Victorian values are not the dominating discourse in the novel, to comprehend how sexuality is viewed in contemporary society, it is necessary to understand how views regarding sexuality have varied throughout history (Hall 97-98). By referencing to the Victorian era, the novel reveals how some characters still rely on Victorian values and how the view of sexuality during this era still influences us, as heterosexual relationship is still the norm within the novel. This further emphasises that current views on sexuality are culturally constructed. However, Mrs. Poindexter is fired because of how she treated Liza (219-20), which indicates that the subculture of Victorian values she created is outdated in the eyes of the surrounding world.

In addition to addressing Victorian values, Garden also provides a comparative historical perspective on sexuality by addressing how sexuality was viewed during the ancient Greek period. At one point, Liza applies a world view present during this ancient era to explain her relationship to Annie. She makes a reference to Plato's *Symposium* and Aristophanes' statement regarding that humans were first conjoined beings and some pairs were "man and man, some woman and woman, and others man and woman . . . That's why some lovers are heterosexual and some are homosexual . . ." (116). According to Hall, the notion of how sexuality was viewed during this era emphasises how sexuality as it is naturalised today, is a social construct (100). As a result, by making a reference to Plato's *Symposium* to explain that Annie is her other half, the protagonist enlightens the reader that the naturalisation of sexuality as it is today, could be and have been constructed differently. This is also a significant moment for Liza's acceptance of her own sexuality. Individuals' willingness to continue the gender

performativity within the heterosexual matrix is because they believe it is natural (Butler *Gender* 190), and by denaturalising gender performativity, Liza allows herself to challenge the gender performativity expected of her and to continue her romance with Annie.

3.2 Queer Pedagogy and *Annie on My Mind* in the EFL classroom

In accordance with the curriculum for the subject integrated sex education, the pupils should be provided with knowledge about how norms regarding gender and sexuality influence societies and peoples' lives and life chances (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 6). Literature is advantageous to reach this goal, since literature can support pupils to understand and explore the world around them (Bobkina and Stefanova 677) and norms governing sexuality and gender surround the pupils constantly. Consequently, *Annie* is valuable for this purpose, as the novel addresses *how* heteronormativity operates in order to maintain its dominance and what impact it has on societies and individuals. Zeikowitz explains that teachers might reinforce heteronormativity if they do not address that what is considered as normal, is a social construct (68), and by showing how a heteronormative discourse maintains its power by inducing a sense of naturalness, but also through institutional practices such as regulating information, *Annie* can support the pupils to challenge this discourse. Moreover, since the language in the novel is simple, it is possible for a wide range of pupils to grasp its important content. Therefore, the novel is suitable for English 5 and 6, since the syllabus for these courses state that the teaching of English should develop the pupils' understanding of values, social issues and cultural conditions (Natl. Ag. f. Ed.).

When discussing the protagonist's struggle to acknowledge and accept her sexuality, it is favourable to focus on the dominating discourse depicted in the novel and how it influences her. Inviting the pupils to analyse the prevalent norms in *Annie* also moves the focus from the

Other, to the problems of heteronormativity, which Helmer argues is necessary since solely focusing on the Other will not combat homophobia (902-3). Consequently, it is possible to turn the attention towards what Kumashiro calls “the privileging of the ‘normal’” (37), which makes it possible to question what normal actually is, and how it is upheld. However, Liza’s internal conflict can still be mentioned as it provides an example of how heteronormativity influences individuals.

When this issue is addressed in the classroom, the pupils can analyse and engage in discussions regarding how stereotypes are expressed in the novel and compare these to stereotypes they have encountered in their everyday lives, and how these are constructed. Providing information about the Other can, according to Kumashiro, disrupt harmful knowledge (42), and by inviting the pupils to analyse how a dominant discourse in the novel has resulted in stereotypes and false ideas about homosexuality that are not applicable to the lesbian characters, *Annie* can help them challenge these. However, focusing on stereotypes can be a sensitive topic for those pupils who have been victims of them. As Luhmann points out, homophobia can occur even in a queer studies classroom (125), and homophobia is present in Swedish schools too (Bränström 28). One approach that could minimise the risk of the occurrence of derogatory terms could be to first address the dominating discourse and then move on to the stereotypes and describe them in relation to heteronormativity. If the pupils are not aware of the dominating discourse, it can be difficult to challenge the stereotypes. For example, when addressing the stereotype that in a lesbian relationship one of the women must be masculine, it is favourable if the pupils first have discussed how gender expectations influence how sexuality is viewed and how this is related to heteronormativity.

Moreover, when the novel is introduced in the EFL classroom, it can be necessary to consider the historical setting of the novel in relation to the context of teaching. While Swedish

pupils attend a school that is working according to a curriculum that states that no one in school should be exposed to discrimination based on gender or sexuality (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. "Curriculum" 4), Liza was almost expelled due to her sexuality. Even though the Stonewall Riots had spurred the gay rights movement and encouraged activism that led to policy changes (Britannica), many problems still remained at the time of the publication. For example, while the APA recognised that homosexuality was not an illness in 1973, homosexuality was still classified as "sexual orientation disturbance" until 1987 (Landers and Kapadia 849). Therefore, when addressing Liza's reaction to the encyclopedia and the regulation of information in terms of how no lesbian love stories with happy endings were available, such cultural differences should probably be explained to the pupils to support their understanding and analysis of what society was like at the time when *Annie* was published. However, the norms in the novel might not be as distant to all pupils in accordance to what Hall argues, that views on sexuality are not cross cultural (99). Thus, it is beneficial to consider the normative expectations in the novel in relation to the context of teaching.

Consequently, in the Swedish EFL classroom, the novel could be analysed with focus on how normative expectations have changed. As Zeikowitz explains, in order to understand how normalcy and oppression were constructed in an earlier period, the students must analyse the cultural norms at that time and while doing so, they can make references to their own cultural values (68-69). If the pupils are provided with information about the situation for queers during the 1980s in the US, they can analyse how normalcy is constructed in the novel and compare it to how normalcy is constructed today. Hall writes that norms change all the time and in order to understand how some groups are marginalised today, we must understand how oppression has changed over time (97-98). As a result, a comparison can help the pupils understand how norms are changeable, and how some old values might influence how sexuality

is viewed today. Furthermore, connecting the content to the pupils' own lives can be important both in order to initiate change (Winans 104-5) and to motivate them to read (Bland 21).

Two other important aspects of the novel that can be challenging to address, are when Liza through her thoughts challenges the heterosexual matrix and when the concept natural, in terms of how Liza and Ms. Baxter use it, is called into question. The challenge here is to point the attention towards how heteronormativity has repressed Liza's feelings, rather than pointing out Liza as deviant. Thus, similarly to when approaching the stereotypes, it can be favourable to address the dominating discourse first. Regarding the concept "natural," Ms. Baxter serves as a great example because she relies on religion to decide what is natural, which can be addressed when discussing how this concept is constructed. A suggestion for how to work with this in the classroom is to engage the pupils in both classroom discussions and individual reflections and writing. Group discussions can be a motivational factor since, as Hebb argues, the feeling of being part of a social context is important to motivate readers (22-3). Engaging in discussions is also beneficial in order to avoid that pupils' understandings remaining hidden and undeveloped in their reading journals (Helmer 913). However, considering the fact that it is a sensitive topic it can be favourable to allow the pupils to present some of their understandings individually in writing, since some pupils might fear having to express themselves regarding the topic, and the opportunity to reflect individually is also an important part of the reading process (Hebb 23).

Also, the treatment of Liza, Ms. Stevenson and Ms. Widmer at Foster is a sensitive topic, which could be related to the ongoing changes that the novel captures and how norms are limited to their context. Here, it might be a favourable idea to emphasise how Mrs. Poindexter represents Victorian values, and that they are not accepted by the trustees. A comparison to another time period can further underscore the understanding of norms as

changeable and not fundamental truths, and that the novel manages to capture an ongoing change in society. Similarly, the novel's reference to Plato's *Symposium* can be used to denaturalise sexuality by comparing the view of sexuality in the ancient Greek era to not only the norms regarding sexuality in the novel, but also to the current Swedish context. According to Helmer, the goal should be to denaturalise the normative expectations that are governing genders and sexualities (904) and using a comparative perspective could be one approach to do this in the EFL classroom. However, one does not necessarily need to limit the discussion to the three periods mentioned above. The pupils are probably aware of how sexuality is and has been viewed in different cultures during different times, which can be brought into the discussion to strengthen the denaturalisation of sexuality. As Neto writes, a queer perspective in the classroom can provide a critical view on the heteronormativity that normally dominates the classroom (591) and applying this comparative perspective could make the pupils begin to question the heteronormativity that surrounds them. Moreover, even though the incorporation of a queer perspective during a few lessons might not cause a fundamental change, the denaturalisation of sexuality can constitute a step towards challenging heteronormativity. As Zeikowitz argues, if the pupils realise that their current beliefs are a result of dominating discourses, and not the characteristics of the Other, the pupils might start to change their views (70).

4. Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to analyse how Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* poses a challenge to heteronormativity by exposing how a heteronormative discourse influences the characters, but also how the novel reveals the faults of this discourse and shows how the norms governing gender and sexuality within a heteronormative environment are limited to their context. In addition, the present study has investigated the possibility to use *Annie* in the EFL

classroom in Sweden in order to assist the pupils to analyse, rethink and challenge heteronormativity.

The analysis shows how a heteronormative discourse within the novel operates in order to maintain the status of heterosexuality as a so-called natural option. The influence of such discourse is noticeable in terms of how the protagonist struggles to accept her sexuality, stereotypes regarding homosexuality and the institutional practice of producing knowledge that provides an uninformed idea about homosexuals. By applying a queer perspective, and analysing how the heterosexual matrix has influenced the stereotypes and the information about sexuality that Liza encounters, it is possible to challenge this uninformed idea that causes homophobia and repression of feelings, since it is exposed that these are only a result of how a dominating discourse has produced information in order to maintain its own status.

In addition, the novel also challenges the heterosexual matrix as Liza's feelings for Annie develop. Her feelings for Annie and her rethinking of things she has believed her whole life, problematise the notion of the heterosexual matrix that feminine must desire masculine. Moreover, the heterosexual matrix is further challenged as its monopoly on the concept "natural" is undermined. This is evident, both with regard to how Liza argues that her feelings are natural, and when it is used with support of religion, which helps the reader to expose it as a cultural construct.

Furthermore, while showing how the heterosexual matrix works to repress queer people as Liza was punished by the headmistress Mrs. Poindexter due to her sexuality, the novel also addresses how norms constantly change by addressing how the conservative values imposed by Mrs. Poindexter are not applicable in surrounding society. Similarly, by making references to different time periods, such as the Victorian era and the ancient Greek era, *Annie* helps the reader to understand how norms change all the time and thus, that they are not stable or

fundamental truths. As a result, applying a queer perspective can assist to denaturalise the norms governing sexuality.

Consequently, since *Annie* concerns the influence of a heteronormative discourse, but also challenges it, the novel is valuable in the EFL classroom in order to rethink and challenge heteronormativity. The novel has a simple, yet still authentic, language, which makes it easy for a broad range of pupils to take part of its content. Since the novel contains real-life issues, it can also be connected to the pupils' own lives, which is essential both to challenge heteronormativity, and as a motivational factor. However, it is favourable to focus on the construction of normalcy and the dominating discourse rather than on the individual who is oppressed. By exposing how a dominating discourse in the novel constructs normalcy and oppresses queers, it is possible to invite the pupils to consider how such norms are operating around them. As a result, a queer analysis of the novel can support them to challenge heteronormativity, both within the novel, and in their own lives. Moreover, since the novel was written almost 40 years ago, it might be necessary to provide the pupils with contextual information in order to help them grasp the norms during the 1980s in the US. However, the historical distance provides a comparative perspective that can further support the pupils' understanding of that norms are unstable, changeable social constructs.

For further studies on the novel, it would be interesting to analyse the socioeconomic perspective of Liza's and Annie's romance. Liza lives in Brooklyn Heights, which is a wealthy area, while Annie lives in a more troubled area. This makes it interesting to analyse how socioeconomic differences influence their possibilities in life. Also, a comparative analysis, in which *Annie* is compared to a more recent lesbian novel, could further reveal how norms have changed and what aspects that are still addressed in lesbian literature within YA fiction. This

would probably be a very effective approach when applying a pedagogical perspective since it would provide the pupils with a clearer understanding of norms and the characteristics of these.

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