The Labelization and Identity of Lisbeth Salander

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Abstract Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (English title) has produced a veritable renewing of the Swedish mystery/detective/crime novel. Larsson's writings give a voice of rationale to sometimes turbulent and changing times. The author employs an important factor and one of the major changes during the later half of the last century as a core theme, the advent of the personal computer. In this book, Larsson exposes not only the benefits of personal computers, but also its liabilities. One main topic he uses in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*[1] is one of the unexpected by-products of using computers. This paper examines how Larsson uses labels to define, Lisbeth Salander, one of two main protagonists in this book and a computer hacker, as a character of different identities. Larsson carefully uses these labels to give insight and connect the character to different sub-cultures that Lisbeth Salander embodies. Further discussed is how this label usage reveals Salander's transformation from a negative portrayal of a frustrated, reclusive computer hacker, into the reluctant, acceptable heroine.
Key words punk; Goth; label; hacker; Stieg Larsson; Lisbeth Salander

Introduction

In 1997 Stieg Larsson jots down a simple outline of a story. The narrative revolved around an elderly man who received flowers from an unknown person on his birthday; the catch here is that he had been receiving these flowers every year on his birthday for over forty years. The foundation for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is that of a traditional mystery novel, the need to find out who is sending the flowers. This, though, is only the first link, and it is the catalyst in a chain of events the metamorphosis into a larger, noir trilogy. These books are important to the author in that they personally connected Larsson to social and cultural issues that the he had a private relation to.

This paper examines Lisbeth Salander, one of two main protagonists in this book, and how she is a character born of the computer sub-culture. The labels that are carefully used by Larsson and discussed in this paper give insight into different areas of the computer sub-culture that Lisbeth Salander embodies. Further discussed, is how label usage reveals Salander's transformation from a negative portrayal of a frustrated, reclusive computer hacker, into the reluctant, acceptable heroine.

Stieg Larsson (1954 – 2004) was a Swedish journalist of renown, with a background for being involved in issues that others might find sensitive or dangerous to delve into. His upbringing, as discussed below, had a definite imprint on his choices, some leading to an almost cathartic purging through his writings.

Larsson's life was different from many Swedes in that when his parents moved to Stockholm in 1955, Stieg remained in northern Sweden to be raised by his maternal grandparent (Pettersson 2011). His semi-idyllic childhood was greatly influenced by his grandfather's beliefs, which were very anti-Nazi and anti-fascist. These beliefs ended his grandfather in the Swedish work camp, Storsien, during World War II. Post WWII saw the transformation of Sweden from a neutral, non-voiced entity in World War II, to a voice for human rights, yet still keeping its tradition of neutrality, a political stance that the world has now come to expect. The youth culture of the 70's brought the rhetoric of Olof Palme to the forefront, and the Prime Minister's ever growing popularity in Sweden as a voice against the Vietnam War (Britannica.com). It was during this time of the early 70's that Larson met his life-companion, Eva Gabrielsson, at a rally opposing the Vietnam War in Umeå, in northern Sweden.

Larsson started his journalistic career as a graphic designer for Sweden's Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå, one of Sweden's leading news concerns. In the late 70's and early 80's, he became interested in the revival of right-wing politics in Sweden, and wrote for different media such as *Searchlight*. In 1995 in collaboration effort with among others, Andreas Rosenlund *Expo* was created. This magazine specialized in examining the racist, anti-semitic, anti-democratic and nationalist, far-right, their organizations and connections between countries. Even during his off hours Stieg had other writing projects, one being his short idea for what became the first of *The Millennium Trilogy*, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Larsson's work came to an abrupt end at the beginning of November in 2004, when he died of a heart attack, and leaving the world with some of the most interesting characters in Swedish crime fiction.

Lisbeth Salander was created by author Stieg Larsson as one of two main protagonists in his book *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Larsson was involved in working with individual's rights and female rights in particular (Webmaster 2012), and this work in his life could be contributed to an incident in his teenage years. This episode Larsson related to was from his youth, when he was about 15-years old; he stood by and did nothing when a girl he knew was raped (Winkler 2004) His later attempts at apologizing for his non-action were rebuffed by the female victim, it is possible that this incident gave Larsson a need to create a character such as Salander as a form of penance for his inaction?

Labels in Use

The use of labels is able to help "shed light on the construction, maintenance, and alteration of social identity" (Galinsky et al, 2003). By analysing the labels that Larsson makes use of in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the reader can receive an understanding of the character's identity and evolution throughout this book. It is clear that Larsson's use of labels is not superficial; he knows the inherent meanings and critically applies them to both individual characters, as well as how labels are ap-

plied to groups (Galinsky et al, 2003; Stryker 2000) to help readers follow their respective development. Labels are commonly used to give information about something, to state an address or communicate something of importance such as a hazard or a security issue. More often than not, labels are used for product information; in this case the product is the protagonist Lisbeth Salander.

Salander's character and traits are revealed by herself, as well as other characters. These labels are descriptors with both denotations and connotations possible. The denotations are used with the conventions and understandings that are expected, whereas the use of labels and their connotations give other possibilities and information that goes beyond a surface understanding. Labels that are denotations are straight forward and literal. A stop sign will denote *to stop*; whereas the connotation of a stop sign gives other possibilities such as a warning; you take a risk of possible injury of you do *not* stop. The different ways in which Larsson uses labels, both as denotations and connotations, give more information to the reader when he is aware of them and helps reveals a multi-faceted individual.

One finds that labels are attached to items in different ways, for example sewn into a garment or printed on a package. Salander's character seems to have a multitude of these; some are sewn into *her* and can only be cut out, whereas other labels can be imprinted on fabric and might fade with time. The hacker label used is one that is a part of her, *sewn* into her in a sense, and would be difficult to ever remove from her. Labels that can fade with time can be connected to the *introverted* label. Salander's evolution throughout the novel and one of Larsson's final expositions at the end is how she becomes more extroverted (516). Other labels used to describe Salander are *put on* and *peeled off*, such as the use of *retarded*. This label is used in many situations, and it is often where other characters do not delve deeper into Salander as a person (38, 188, 209) and fail to notice the unusual individual that she is.

Lisbeth's creation is an amalgamation of many different labels that are given to the reader as character traits. These labels, such as *prickly and irksome*, *introverted*, *retarded* (Larsson 38, 150, 209) are used often and reasserted throughout the book. Martin and Simms state that Salander is the proverbial "diminutive hacker genius" (8), or a "genial, tattooed, more or less asocial, assertive computer hacker 'good helper'" (47) as Coppock adds. These are basic identity clues that Larsson repeats to show that some labels cannot be removed. These are the ones that Lisbeth cannot throw away, and are a part of her underlying, and visually unseen, intelligence and morality.

Labels: Pippi and Lisbeth

Larsson himself connected the original idea of Lisbeth Salander to Sweden's best known, red-headed feminist, Pippi Longstocking, by questioning what Pippi would be like in the 21st century; a world where Big Brother is around every corner, and the demands of conformatism are even more embedded in some societies. How would she react to everyday life in the mediated and jacked-up world we live in? And who would she become, a doctor, an astronaut, a CEO? And where would we find her? The fol-

lowing is from one of the few interviews with Larsson as to his thoughts on this unique character.

> Mr. Larsson especially liked the idea of a grown-up Pippi, a dysfunctional girl, probably with attention deficit disorder, who would have had a hard time finding a place in society but would nonetheless take a firm hand in directing her own destiny. That musing led to the creation of Lisbeth Salander, the central character in Mr. Larsson's trilogy. (Ryan 2010)

In this brief explanation Larsson, one sees the labels he utilized to define a very traditional Swedish children's character. The labels used here carry meaning beyond what is expected and can be unexpected for some. By referring to two clinical terms *dysfunctional* and *ADD*, Larsson tells the reader in this interview that the character, Pippi, is not acting within societal expectations, in other words she is not normal. Nor is she attentive to what is happening, she is possibly behaving as though she was in a fantasy world.

> As a comparison between*The Girl with the Dragon* Tattoo, as well as any one of the Pippi Longstocking novels, one can connect several traits between Pippi Longstocking and Lisbeth Salander. Pippi's unrequited need to just get things done, as well as her stand-fastness to truth and understanding, with a genuine belief in that sometimes laws don't apply, has a tell-tale thread that can be followed between her and Lisbeth Salander (Larsson 309 – 311, 338; Lindgren 13 – 14, 87 – 88).

From Pippi's labels to Salander's obsessive like tendencies for knowledge (Martin & Simms 10 – 14), we see Salander basing so much of her existence on this knowledge notonly for her survival, Lisbeth uses this knowledge as her identity; without knowledge she cannot find truth and *know* (Larsson 41 – 44; Lindgren 38, 87 – 89) or can she have the control she needs. Truth and understanding are keywords here, as they apply to Pippi as well as Salander, although in different ways. For Pippi knowledge is self-evident in right and wrong, she exudes adult-like common sense (Lindgren 50, 74, 78), yet she is always considered a child in her childish actions. With Lisbeth though, the internet is her gateway to knowledge, which is built upon truth and understanding. As much as the internet is a mine-field of truth and inaccuracies ever blending and merging, she has an inherent awareness and a clear understanding of both parts (218 – 222).

Labels: Larsson's Lisbeth

According to one source, as of March 2012 there are approximately 7.9 billion web pages of all types (de Kunder 2012) including personal, governmental, business, shopping and the social media sites. Salander is at home in the computer age, and shows the reader that she is aware of the deeper meaning of information, "Knowledge is power" (308). This is the core element of her identity that Larsson instils in her.

Larsson also bestows on her the inherent ability to find knowledge and information, and more importantly the ability to extrapolate and give meanings to what she finds. Larsson reveals more of Lisbeth the adult, by exposing important events during her childhood.

As an only child, and one that has grown up in the (social service) system in Sweden, Lisbeth will never fully divulge herself of some labels. Her character can be seen as always alone and mostly in control, yet never fully (148 – 152) in the book, although her evolution in the two following books finds a definite change and is left for a future discussion. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth anticipates being judged by others, and as experience has taught her, she expects that she will not be accepted, and this catalyst leads her to consciously decide which label(s) is to be used and when, to her they are interchangeable and part of her.

> She took the rings out of her eyebrows and nostril, put on a pale pink lipstick, and examined herself in the bathroom mirror. She looked like any other woman out for a weekend stroll, and she regarded her outfit as appropriate camouflage for an expedition behind enemy lines. (96 – 97)

Her choice is a combination of Punk and Goth, yet the excerpt above tells the reader that she is aware of the need to fit in and conform at times and for specific reasons. Lisbeth's personal choice is the punk culture and what that label denotes, one of self-freedom with its core in anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian view of society without a government or political authority; everyone is responsible for themselves. She also retains a slight gothic influence. This label relates to the dark, black era of the 19th century, where vampires, ghosts and the supernatural found its birth in such writers as E. A. Poe, Mary Shelly, and Bram Stoker. As punk and Goth labels are identity markers that are intertwined the connotation is that she is of a dark nature, and ready to rebel.

Labels: Cyber Hacker

The cyberpunk culture is a new and often misunderstood one, as others, it too has several sub-cultures. Salander has grown up as a part of this culture and in Jones' *Hyper-punk: Cyberpunk and Information Technology* he refers to Sterling's explanation:

> The cyberpunks are perhaps the first SF generation to grow up not only within the literary tradition of science fiction but in a truly science-fictional world. For them, the techniques of classical "hard SF" —extrapolation, technological literacy—are not just literary tools but an aid to daily life. They are a means of understanding, and highly valued. (xi)

Being an only child, at the time when the Internet was making its introduction to the world, makes it likely that Lisbeth would be drawn to a vast wellspring of knowledge that is open to all. Yet, her experience tells her to judge this information for herself,

rather than be told, as to what is right/wrong, good/bad, or even acceptable/unacceptable. It is no coincidence that the World Wide Web is the place where Lisbeth can spend her time. It becomes Salander's backyard and playground and is a catalyst to her life and of her creation by Larsson. In one sense, the Internet is the safe area, or home, where she feels most secure (104 – 106). Salander is a product of the Internet and its evolution; it is the environment she wants around her. It is the superhighway to everywhere that she utilizes. It is also the wormhole to any-*when*, as the internet is full of old, forgotten webpages that are never deleted. Larsson makes use of this link to the past to give Salander a heightened sense of internet in which to build a background from the early 1920's onward. This is a virtual place, and Salander embodies the hacker label, and hence, calls it home.

Sherry Turkle in her book *The Second Self*, explains the label *hackers* and how they evolve and become "individuals who have made computers a way of life" (quoted in Barnes 2001 195). Turkle also notes that it is mastery of the object, the computer, which is the aim of the hacker. Salander considers herself one of, if not the best, in all of Sweden and tells the reader that she is even better than Rogue (328) whom was her mentor, she has surpassed him and mastered the machine. Jordon and Taylor, in their work on the hacker culture, give further insight into the hacker culture from the 1990's (1998). Jordon and Taylor go on to write

> Hackers are often pathologised as obsessed, isolated young men. The alien nature of online life allows people to believe hackers more easily communicate with machines than humans, despite hackers' constant use of computers to communicate with other humans. Fear of the power of computers over our own lives underpins this terror. The very anonymity that makes their community difficult to study, equally makes hackers an easy target for pathologising. (775)

Yet, if this evident today where does Lisbeth Salander fit in? Hackers, as many other cultures, have their own societal make-up. Types of hackers, labelled as *hats*, include but are not exclusive to white, green, blue, red, and black and all of which have different meanings based on symbolic colours. A very simplified breakdown of these is,

> White Hats — helpful, and works for the general good. Is seen to work for companies and governments breaking into systems to help find holes other hackers could exploit.
> Green Hats — are those who have newly come to hacking as an interest or to be a part of the culture, they are "green".
> Blue Hats — those who have a need for revenge, these hackers usually have patience, yet, when they feel that someone or some company/government has done them wrong they will do their utmost for retributions sake.
> Red Hats — are those who are employed by governments or companies to exploit other governments and companies with the aim of creating havoc or disabling them.

> Black Hats — are those who do damagefor damages sake. Some see their work as a necessity for balancing the powers that be; others see their work as a type of testing of their skills. (Jordon and Taylor 1998)

As Salander matured, her experiences led her to personify these types of hats. Some she discarded after usage for specific reasons (green), where others were worn and interchanged when the situation demanded it; white for work or blue for her own reasons.

Labels: Super-hero

Salander is able to find the information and make sense of it, to be able to see the tendrils connecting all the different pieces into a cohesive single meaning. Understanding the Internet as an entity is not always easy. In Taylor's *HACKERS Cyberpunks or microserfs?* (1998) he reviews how hackers were traditionally written when they were in their infancy in literature from 1984. This literature connected the label hacker to the stereotypical, *Star Trek* melding of the always logical Mr. Spock and individualist and sometimes the "end justifies the means" (Erdmann & Block 3) Captain Kirk; adding to this there is the traditional Robin Hood trait. Hackers here, would be "in a futuristic guise as anarchic, mercenary and technically savvy mavericks who seek (with generally limited success) to reappropriate the technology of advanced capitalism for their own ends" (402). Salander can be seen as embodying the label of Robin Hood. Taking from the rich (523 – 530) and distributing the wealth where she sees fit, as well as being judge and jury by dispersing justice as needed (210, 238 – 246).

This ability to understand such a multitude of conflicting parts can be equated to an almost super-human ability, but there is another piece of Lisbeth that makes this possible, she has an eidetic memory (394). With this knowledge the reader can easily connect her to some type of super-human, or super-heroine. As with most super-heroes, the need for anonymity is tantamount. On her travels on the information super-highway, Salander gives away only one marker for her identity (546), her nom de plume in this world is *Wasp*. Keeping its secret is important to her, as it is to any other superhero for example Barbara Gordon (*Bat Girl*), Diana Prince (*Wonder Woman*) or in this case Janet Von Dyne (*Wasp*).

As with the original super-hero labelled Wasp, Salander has equivalent super powers beyond her memory that can be linked to each other. The Marvel Comics superhero could change size, small to large, and fly through the air. Here Lisbeth is of diminutive stature, yet her Gothic and Punk looks are larger than life (214). Lisbeth can metaphorically fly through the internet, going almost anywhere — including through firewalls. Lastly, Lisbeth's ability to use technology, and gadgets to her advantage. The sting of the original Wasp can be acutely connected to the sting of a taser and 75,000 volts of electricity going through a body that Salander uses without hesitation (238). Larsson has chosen these labels holding deeper information and meaning for those readers knowledgeable within this genre.

Through Salander's knowledge she has power, and this grows throughout the no-

vel. This power lets her walk in different cultures, conveniently connect wisps of information unseen by others, and have a beneficial effect on those she deems worthy enough to help. Salander wishes to remain the anonymous hero, without connection to any benevolent results of her actions, yet still know the results of her actions are those she expected them to be. She is an enigma in this first book, and her awkwardness is well set by Larsson by describing her early on as fitting in as well as "a buffalo at a boat show" (34). As a super-hero, Lisbeth Salander evolves into a traditional positive heroine, helping clear the male protagonist; not because she was asked or coerced, but because she felt it was the right thing to do. Salander then goes beyond this, managing monetary retribution for him by using her powers and knowledge of the internet and its financial world (542 – 545).

Stieg Larsson created a character that is difficult to define. Lisbeth Salander is labelized throughout this book helping readers connect with a complicated character, one that is reluctant to open up and be known through traditional character interaction, exposition and story actions. By using labels, Larsson gives the reader a veritable cornucopia of information to consider and possibly identify with. The way in which Larsson wrote *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* places the burden upon the reader, where the reader must look deeper at these labels, and be willing to attain knowledge about the multitude of cultures that they are connected to, and understand the vast meanings that are exploited.

Note

1. All Page numbers given in parenthesis with no authorial connection are connected to Larsson, Stieg, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* as stated in the works cited list.

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