

Kraften att älska, makten att tjäna:

Religion, emancipation och den kvinnliga skapande kraften i
Jeanna Oterdahls sagor 1908–1927

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The Strength to Love, the Power to Serve: Religion, Emancipation and Female Creativity in the Stories of Jeanna Oterdahl 1908–1927

Abstract
This dissertation studies the Swedish author Jeanna Oterdahl (1879–1965), and the fairy tales and stories she wrote in the period 1908–1927. Oterdahl was a well-known Christian public intellectual in her day. Besides being an author, she worked as a teacher and a lecturer, and was importantly involved in a number of organizations for societal development, such as the Association of the Christian Social Life [Förbundet för kristet samhällsliv] and the Settlement Movement [Hemgårdsrörelsen].

The purpose of this study is to investigate the religious elements in her fairy tales and stories, and to study how these elements relate to the ideology of the early Swedish women’s emancipation movement. This movement rejected the conservative Christian faith of the Lutheran State Church, and aligned itself with the liberal form of Christianity that, to a greater extent, recognized the equality of men and women before God.

Part I deals with the Christian message of love and its relation to emancipatory elements in Oterdahl’s stories. The point of departure for the analysis is Bremer’s interpretation of the Virgin Mary’s response to God’s calling, "Behold, the Lord’s servant" [Se, Herrens tjänarinna] and its emancipatory meaning. The women of Oterdahl’s stories take the role of servants of *the Lord* – not *Lords* [Herrens tjänarinna, inte herramas]

Part II studies the female characters’ quest for their true (female) selves and their true home where alienation between the sexes will cease to exist and a spiritual kinship can take its place. This true home need not necessarily be a physical place; it can be in the form of an idea or a faith in something higher – such as God – where the self can live and reach its full personal potential. Part II analyzes Oterdahl’s understanding of the female characters’ quest against the background of Emilia Fogelklou’s interpretation of the role of Eve in the Genesis creation narrative (presented in her work “Two fairy tales” [Två sagor]), and against the background of one of Oterdahl’s own lectures, “How We Create a Home” [Hur vi skapa ett hem].

The study ends with a discussion of how the concepts of freedom and power figure in Oterdahl’s stories. “Freedom” in Oterdahl’s stories is not a pursuit of power, but has to do with the use of one’s special gifts and with service to others. Freedom, in other words, means to take on responsibilities not only in the private home, but also in the community. Fogelklou describes this as a “human cause” [människosak] – something for women and men to strive for together.

By examining how the Christian message of love is expressed through the emancipatory efforts of the female protagonists in Oterdahl’s stories, the dissertation highlights a new dimension in her work, and puts in question the common description of her stories as reactionary. Reinterpreted against the background of the Christian concept of calling/vocation and the ideology of the early emancipationist movement, the seemingly reactionary stories can be understood as emphasizing the importance of women in a changing society.

Keywords

Fairy tale, religion, Lutheran doctrine of vocation, liberal theology, women’s emancipation movement, Fredrika Bremer Association [Fredrika-Bremer-förbundet], Christian love, power, freedom, female creativity, women’s calling/vocation, female identity, Jeanna Oterdahl, Fredrika Bremer, Emilia Fogelklou, Anna Sandström, Sophie Adlersparre, anxiety of authorship, Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan D. Gubar, artistry of women writers.

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