

The paper takes as its starting point the theory of sexuality as a social structure defined, among other things, by sexual cultures and their distinctive discourses and imperatives. The analysis of the distinguishing elements of restrictive and permissive sexual cultures in two of Simona Semenič's plays - *this apple, made of gold* and *rowan, strudel, dance and more* - shows that sexuality is indeed one of the central themes in both plays. Furthermore, the playwright situates the thematisation of all sexual cultures in the context of social changes in organising sexuality. The dramatic subject finds herself in the grip of the modernisation of sexuality from which she is liberated through a drive to detraditionalise and individualise her sexuality and through a change in sexual morality. Simona Semenič primarily liberates the woman and her sexuality, who - with the rejection of the anti-sexual tradition of the Roman Catholic Church and the social changes in the organisation of sexuality in (post-)socialist society - traverses the path from sexual restraint to sexual liberalisation. The analysis proves that a sexually liberated woman, as thematised by Simona Semenič, is a novelty in Slovenian drama.

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**Keywords:** Slovenian drama, Simona Semenič, sexuality, social changes, sexual cultures

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# The Sexually Liberated Woman: Sexuality and Sexual Cultures in Two Plays by Simona Semenič

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The paper answers the question about which concepts of social change in the organisation of sexuality in modern and late modern societies and identification elements of restrictive and permissive sexual cultures Simona Semenič (1975) applies to thematise sexuality in her plays *this apple, made of gold* (2016) and *rowan, strudel, dance and more* (2017).

The dramatic action of *rowan, strudel, dance and more* is centred on a Catholic mass and a Socialist celebration organised by the villagers on the same day at the same time. In the rural milieu, sexuality – expressed as continuous performance – is intensified to such an extent that it becomes the central driving force of the action. The analysis reveals that the author's thematisation of sexuality originates in the concepts that are characteristic of both modern and late modern societies: 1) the subjective experience of sexuality (e.g., masturbation); 2) the secularisation of sexual desire (evident in all-female characters, who initiate most of all the sexual acts in the play); 3) plastic sexuality (female sexual autonomy and awareness of one's own sexuality, especially sexual desire and pleasure – the character of Višnja); 4) the individualisation of the human being through liberated sexual roles (e.g., Karl's oral stimulation of Angela); 5) the individual sexual biographies of all the villagers; and 6) the independent episodes of fragmented sexual experiences (e.g., between Ciril and Bogdana). The thematisation of sexual pleasure focuses on orgasmic effects: the privileging of immediacy (e.g., between Vilijem and Estera), the impoverishment of intimacy and emotionality (e.g., the sexual act between Višnja and the handsome boy) and on recurrent sexual episodes (e.g., between Ciril and Angela) that provide a framework for pure pleasure based on confluent interests.

Sexuality in the text is thematised through the elements of a permissive sexual culture: free sexual expression between two equal subjects (a feature of all the explicit sexual acts), where consensual sex with more foreplay prevails (e.g., between Bogdana and Ciril), that is to say, there is reciprocity and a strongly accentuated orgasmic imperative. The characters in the play, especially the women, are sexually liberated to such an extent that they become full-blooded orgasm-hunters; orgasms are experienced by everyone, with almost everyone.

The only two exceptions are the nun Helena on the bike, an eroticised symbol of chastity, and the forever doubting priest Jože, a bastion of the centuries of restrictive sexual ethics, who fanatically introduces the story of the famous Italian singer Mina into his sermons on lust and pride and who obsessively listens to Mina's music in his room, perhaps masturbating while doing so. It is certainly no coincidence that the play is set on Assumption Day – Christianity idealises women and overcomes its aversion to sexuality through the cult of Mary's virginity – and on the day of the Yugoslav National Army border guards – the defenders of the socialist idea. Thus, the initial conflict grows into a conflict between sexual cosmopolitanism and sexual fundamentalism.

The centre of the dramatic action of *this apple, made of gold*, with the title's allusion to the biblical motif of original sin, is the antagonism between Christian morality, tradition and patriarchy, on the one hand, and secularisation, detraditionalisation and individualisation on the other. The antagonism is expressed most strongly in Živa's decision to keep her child and continue her marital relationship with her husband, Peter, despite her infidelity and pregnancy with another man. The question of abortion is juxtaposed with the questioning of the authority of the nuclear family as the postulate of procreation, monogamy and patriarchy. The central dramatic conflict is supported by 1) the traditional sexual norms of double standards with the compulsory sexual inequality between men and women (the whore: every woman wants to be or is a whore at least once – a symbol of the process of liberation from the norms; the queen: every woman dreams of being a queen – a symbol of the desire for sexual freedom and governing sexual desire); 2) the centuries of dominating heteronormativity and patriarchy (e.g., Mira's marriage and bad conscience when cheating); 3) sexism and paternalism (the professor's sexual exploitation of students); and 4) as a counterbalance, the neoliberal individual of late modernity trapped in routine (the pharmacist Peter) – used by the author to draw attention to the lifestyles of the individuals of their own biographies whose emotional relationships and love are not a natural given, but the result of shared work (e.g., the relationship between Peter and Živa).

The scenes of explicit sexuality in *this apple, made of gold* are thematised with the concepts typical of late modern societies and, primarily, the elements of a permissive sexual culture. The professor's sexual demands on Vesna and other female students – thematised through the discourse of the male sexual drive and underlined with sexism and the ideology of paternalism – and Vesna's encounter with the Dalmatian Šimun, marked by biological discourse and the coital imperative, whom she rejects in the knowledge of her predetermined passive role – are the two instances that do not fit the conclusion made above. These are elements of a restrictive sexual culture.

In both texts, Simona Semenič addresses sexuality. She unties it as a central dramatic drive with a number of key concepts typical of modern and late modern societies as well as with the main elements of a permissive sexual culture and, less prominently, with the elements of a restrictive sexual culture. The central conflict between sexual fundamentalism (Christian morality, tradition, patriarchy) and sexual cosmopolitanism (secularisation, detraditionalisation, individualisation) is highlighted by the orgasmic imperative; the characters, especially the women, are (for the first time in Slovenian drama) sexually liberated to the point of becoming full-blooded orgasm-seekers.

In both plays, Simona Semenič not only portrays sexually liberated women but also makes up for the century-long deficit of (the thematisation of) explicit sexuality and sex in Slovenian drama.

*Translated by Andrej Zavrl*