

Woman in Pants

Salka Valka and Halldór Laxness's Queer Modernism

ABSTRACT

This article explores queer threads in works by Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness, the novel *Salka Valka* (1931–1932) and its precursor, a film script Halldór wrote for Hollywood in 1928. The protagonist, Salka, renounces female gender roles by wearing pants, cutting her hair short and repeatedly claiming she is ‘no woman’. There are no apparent signs of homosexual desire in Salka, but heterosexual desire and its consequences – marriage and children – terrify her, and she eventually chooses to be single and autonomous. The article outlines how Salka is rural, solitary and ‘typically’ Icelandic, yet at the same time, she represents modernist discourses and transnational connections, combining, for example, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Marxist feminism, cinematic art and the local cultural history of seawomen in Iceland. Paying particular attention to gender, sexuality and the meaning of place, the article suggests that Salka’s character integrates two figures and their queerness: the cosmopolitan modern woman and the fisherwoman, a local figure deeply rooted in Icelandic culture and history. The novel’s setting, the small fishing village of Óseyri, serves as an intersection and medium between the extremes of transatlantic modernisation – local and global, tradition and transformation.

Keywords: Halldór Laxness, Icelandic literature, queer literature, queer modernism, geomodernism

THE FIRST ICELANDER to publicly address homosexuality in a positive or non-judgmental manner was presumably Halldór Laxness (1902–1998), a young writer who would later become Iceland’s first and only Nobel Prize winner.¹ In 1920, 18-year-old Halldór participated in a dialogue in the newspaper *Alþýðublaðið*, where he argued that drinking and homosexuality were equally non-derogatory habits and asked: ‘Or does it in any way debase Shakespeare’s intellectual greatness that “wise men” say he was homosexual?’ (Laxness 1920). Seven years later, he published his third novel, trailblazing modernist work *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (1927; *The Great Weaver from Kashmir*, 2008), which includes the earliest open discussion of homosexuality in Icelandic fiction (Benediktsdóttir 2022b). Halldór is thus an indubitable pioneer in Icelandic queer history and queer literary history. This aspect of Iceland’s most distinguished writer may come as a surprise, however, because Halldór was not known for being an advocate of LGBT rights, and nothing indicates that he was queer himself. A quick observation of his literary work – which is voluminous and spans almost 70 years – suggests that queer characters and themes appear in many of his novels, such as *Atómstöðin* (1948; *The Atom Station*, 1961) and *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (1968; *Under the Glacier*, 1972).² However, little attention has been paid to this aspect of Halldór’s oeuvre.

In a previous article, I discussed *The Great Weaver*, which is a landmark text not only because of the role queer sexuality plays in the life of the protagonist but also because it caught people’s attention and led to (brief and primarily negative) discussion of homosexuality in the media (Benediktsdóttir 2022b). Working along similar lines, this article explores a queer character, Salka Valka, who emerges in the eponymous novel *Salka Valka* (1931–1932) and its precursor, a pitch film script that almost landed Halldór a Hollywood deal in 1928. Paying particular attention to gender, sexuality and the meaning of place in *Salka Valka* and the screenplay, as well as to diverse modernist discourses that inspire and feature in Halldór’s texts, the article suggests that Salka integrates two figures: the cosmopolitan modern woman and the fisherwoman, a local figure deeply rooted in Icelandic culture and history. Both are

queer in the sense that they revolt against or evade sexual and gendered social norms. Salka's queerness is thus simultaneously global and local. The setting, the small fishing village Óseyri, serves as an intersection and medium between the extremes of transatlantic modernisation – local and global, tradition and transformation.

Writing for the world

Halldór Laxness was, in the 1920s, an enthusiastic writer who travelled widely around Europe and absorbed various ideologies, currents, religions and politics. The small-mindedness of his fellow Icelanders annoyed him, as did the idealisation of rural culture that was at the core of Icelandic nationalism and commonly seen as the foundation of Icelandic society in the past, present and future (Gudmundsson 2023, 42–185). The dramatic transformation from a traditional rural society to industrial urbanisation, which was one of the key characteristics of early-to-mid-twentieth-century Iceland, was met with anxious hostility in political and cultural discourse, and modern innovations were often linked to foreign influences or seen as corrupting. In this context, homosexuality was typically portrayed as a foreign phenomenon or a modern threat – or, more generally, ignored or suppressed. The press remained largely silent on such issues until the 1950s, although there were notable exceptions, including contributions by Halldór (Benediktsdóttir 2022a, 2022b).

Identifying strongly as a cosmopolitan, Halldór adopted a provocative and somewhat arrogant tone in his writing and did not hesitate to criticise, scold or educate his nation. This is evident in polemic articles he published in 1925 while in Taormina, Sicily, writing *The Great Weaver*, where he presents himself as a spokesman for European modernity, including technology, avant-garde art, women's rights and sexual liberalism – diverse sources of modernist knowledge that he felt the urge to share with his Icelandic readers. In a series of articles titled 'Af íslensku menningarástandi' ('On the state of Icelandic culture'), for example, Halldór discusses what he saw while observing Icelandic society and culture as 'an informed spectator' during a year's stay in Iceland

in 1924–1925. He describes the primitive life in the countryside and the modern revolution that he claims to be underway. ‘Reykjavík has now suddenly obtained everything that suits a cosmopolitan city, not only a university and cinemas, but also football and homosexuality’, he says (Laxness 1925a, 2), and unlike most contemporary intellectuals, he urges his nation towards modernisation. Halldór claims that Icelanders must move past their adolescent tendencies and embrace growth – learn about fashion and architecture, improve their appearance and drinking habits – leaving behind the rural lifestyle of their grandparents, characterised by severe poverty. His comment on homosexuality, moreover, manifests an important association in his mind between homosexuality and modernity – an idea that is also prominent in *The Great Weaver* (Benediktsdóttir 2022b).

Halldór was fascinated by the cinema, the most modern artistic medium (Vilhjálmsson 2011, 2021). Following the publication of *The Great Weaver*, he left for Los Angeles with a lofty goal: to become a scriptwriter in Hollywood. By the end of 1927, he wrote to Inga, his girlfriend, that he was writing two scripts: ‘One of them is called *Kari Karan* or *Judged by a Dog*,’ he says, ‘and the other, *Salka Valka* or *A Woman in Pants*. They will both take time and effort to complete. But if a man does his job in the spirit of perfection, his works will be talked about longer than he lives’ (Gudmundsson 2023, 136). In his letters, Halldór appears arrogantly optimistic about his upcoming success – and in the summer of 1928, in fact, he came close to selling the script of *Salka Valka* to Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios. For a while, it seemed that he would set off to Iceland with a film team and a 50,000-dollar budget. Nothing became of the idea, however, and Halldór left L.A. in late 1929 deeply disappointed and bitter towards American capitalism and the film industry (Gudmundsson 2023, 129–58).

As Halldór Guðmundsson points out, Laxness’s futile quest to Hollywood was a watershed moment in his career. He returned to Iceland with a renewed vow to focus on writing novels in Icelandic about Icelanders – but ‘for the world’ (Gudmundsson 2023, 159). In other words, he set his mind on becoming an international novelist,

yet with his feet on Icelandic ground, and expected no less from this plan than from his Hollywood dream. In 1930, he wrote *Þú vínviður breini* (1931, *O, thou Pure Vine*), the first volume of *Salka Valka*, and the second, *Fuglinn í förunni* (1932, *The Bird on the Beach*) followed a year later. Unlike *The Great Weaver*, which Halldór published himself and which caused great controversy, the two volumes known as *Salka Valka* were published by a governmental agency, The Cultural Fund, and were well received. *Salka Valka* became the first of Halldór's works to be translated into a foreign language when an abridged version was published in Denmark in 1934 and in England and the United States in 1936. Thus, the table was set for Halldór's success both locally and internationally.

The following discussion outlines how, although *Salka Valka* is not an aesthetically experimental text and is generally described as social realism, it is a melting pot of modernist ideas and discourses and inseparable both from Halldór's nonfiction writings on the modernisation of Icelandic society and his radical aesthetic modernism manifested in *The Great Weaver*.³ The avatar of this melting pot is the girl Salka Valka, who disidentifies from femininity and womanhood, whose sexuality is of central importance and whose very existence is bound to a small village on the outskirts of Iceland where local seaside culture meets transnational currents. The girl and the village thus exemplify Halldór's endeavour to write in Icelandic about Icelanders – but for the world. Seen from this perspective, *Salka Valka* readily falls under the term *geo-modernism*, which Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (2005, 3) use to refer to modernist novels whose 'horizon is global and ...voicing is refracted through the local–global dialectic of inside and outside, belonging and exile'. Doyle and Winkiel (2005, 1–2) point out that using local detail as material for new modes of writing was a typical modernist project in the early twentieth century, and such texts often emphasise contradictions like global connection and local alienation. The most prominent global connection present in *Salka Valka* is the struggle of the working class, but as this article outlines, Salka Valka's character and her problematic relationship with heterosexual gender roles and sexuality are directly

linked to Western (if not global) contemporary writings on gender and sexuality. The novel is thus also marked by ‘the sexually transgressive and gender deviant energies that help fuel modernism’s desire to thwart normative aesthetics, knowledges, geographies and temporalities’ – in other words, what Benjamin Kahan (2013, 348) describes as *queer modernism*.

The village

In *Salka Valka*’s opening chapter, the 11-year-old Salvör Valgerður Jónsdóttir arrives with her mother in Óseyri, a (fictional) village probably in the West Fjords of Iceland. Óseyri inadvertently becomes their permanent home when the mother, Sigurlína, headed to Reykjavík, runs out of money and is ordered to leave the boat with her child. From the beginning, their life in Óseyri is marked by poverty and marginalisation. As newcomers, they are met with suspicion, which turns into sexual shaming when Sigurlína, already on the second day, starts an affair with Steinþór, a local fisherman, and moves into his house. The villagers deem Sigurlína to be promiscuous, and the stigma is transferred onto the girl, whose clothing and peculiar appearance mark her as queer. She is not like the other girls and certainly not ‘proper’ or ‘feminine’: she has a deep voice that sounds ‘almost like a man’s’,⁴ her facial muscles twitch uncontrollably and her body is ‘roiled with unruly vitality’ (SV 8). She initially wears men’s clothes because she is poor and they are available to her, but later she deliberately chooses pants over skirts. Salka renounces female gender roles and even her gender, as she repeatedly claims to be ‘no woman’. She expresses her dismay towards motherhood and marriage and cherishes, above all, her independence. As a young girl, she starts working at the fish washing station, and as the novel progresses and the years pass, she works towards operating her own fishing boat.

The village is Salka’s whole world from the age of 11 and is of central importance to the novel. The first volume begins with the narrator’s reflections on villages like Óseyri and how ‘smartly dressed travellers from Reykjavík’ (SV 5) might see it:

When sailing on such a cold and bleak winter's night along these shores, you get the impression that nothing in the world could be more insignificant and meaningless than such a small village under such high mountains. How do people live in such a place? And how do they die? ... Surely, everyone must admit that it's absolutely useless to live in such a place, there being no low ground here except for that little valley, which apparently owes its bottom entirely to the river's sediments. All culture, all human contentment, are created on level ground. In a place that's impossible to escape, and where there's never any hope of meeting strangers, nothing can ever be expected, either. What would happen, for instance, if the priest's son stopped fancying the merchant's daughter? (SV 5–6).

Óseyri is represented here, by an ironic omniscient narrator, as the opposite of culture and modernisation: an isolated, primitive place where people are narrow-minded and naive. The heteronormative behaviour of the bourgeoisie exemplifies how stagnated the village is, and lower-class life is first and foremost depicted as meaningless. As the novel unfolds, the question of what would happen if this stagnation were interrupted is answered. Young villagers, such as the merchant's children and Salka's friend, Arnaldur, leave Óseyri and return with new ideas; Arnaldur becomes a socialist and brings home radical politics, questioning the merchant's power over the people and their lives. A worker's union is founded, a strike is organised, and Óseyri is suddenly connected to the outer world via political and economic threads:

Thus had Óseyri in Axlarfjörður become a major point in existence. Telegrams flew in steady streams to and from Reykjavík, to and from Copenhagen, to and from Spain and Portugal. The world waited anxiously for the decisions that would be made in Óseyri in Axlarfjörður; the newspapers in Reykjavík were full of terrible reports about the strike ... (SV 390).

The village has become a point of intersection between local tradition and global transformation, stagnation and modernization – manifesting Halldór's interest in 'placedness', which he shared with many other modernist writers (Doyle & Winkiel 2005, 1).

Moreover, the struggles and tension around these contradictory ideas and the future of Óseyri are embodied in Salka and the two love triangles that govern her emotional, sexual and financial existence. Like the village, she is grounded and immobile – she has no fantasies about leaving or seeking a better life elsewhere, yet she is torn between opposite forces that seek to repel or attract her. She unwillingly becomes her mother's rival as Steinþór desires the girl from the day they arrive in Óseyri, and he assaults her sexually. His perverted behaviour and Salka's paradoxical response drive Sigurlína to depression, which culminates in her suicide. Salka's feelings towards Steinþór fluctuate between aggressive hatred and confused attraction as he also becomes a part of her other love triangle with Arnaldur.

Arnaldur and Steinþór represent distinct worlds and ideologies that pull at Salka from different directions. Arnaldur is the avatar of modernisation; he is gentle, educated and an advocate of change, but also an unreliable dreamer. Salka loves him and eventually gives in to his affection, and their friendship becomes a love affair. She resists his political agenda, however, eventually ending their affair and setting him free. 'No, Arnaldur, I'm not against you,' she says. 'I'm simply against what I don't understand. Is it my fault that I'm ignorant, maybe, and have always lived in the same village? You've been in big cities, Arnaldur, you know the ways of the world. But I'm just . . . what I am' (SV 377–78). Steinþór, on the other hand, is described as a wild force of nature, and he identifies strongly with Óseyri, although he has sailed around the world. 'This village belongs to me and I belong to this village', he says. 'I have these mountains and this valley and this sea and this village and these people – I have them here, see, in my heart, in my lungs, in my blood' (SV 13–14). He is a fisherman first and foremost, bibulous and violent, and unsympathetic towards class struggle and politics. By the end of the novel, Salka takes note of 'how fiercely the fire burned in

his eyes and how possessed he was of the elemental forces of the earth; his life seemed completely devoid of all higher purpose. For a moment, she felt as if she understood him completely, and the realisation filled her with fear' (SV 504). As Jón Yngvi (Jóhannsson 2018, 46) has noted, despite their differences, Salka and Steinþór are made of the same material; they both represent earthly existence and a sense of reality that Arnaldur lacks.

Salka's distinctive character feature is constantly evading classification and resisting regulation without a particular ideological or political agenda. She believes first and foremost in herself, humanity and equity. The paradoxes that mark her character are, for example, evident in her feelings towards Steinþór and Arnaldur and the worlds they represent. Steinþór is primitive and stagnated, Arnaldur is cultivated and modern, and Salka is both and neither at the same time – like the village itself. She is a very local figure in the sense that she never leaves the village and identifies, at least to some extent, with the mountains and the sea. However, her characterisation manifests a summoning of transnational ideas, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality and queerness.

Uncultivated passions

Shaping and carving Óseyri, the archetypal Icelandic fishing village that would become an arena of conflict between tradition and modernity and an inherent part of Salka's character, was a project that Halldór Laxness took rather seriously. The novel's working title was *Plássið* (*The Village*), which suggests that his primary focus during the writing process was the aforementioned placedness (Guðmundsson 2006, 198). While writing the novel's first volume in 1930, he travelled to fishing villages around the island, where he familiarised himself with local people and living conditions, and his notebooks manifest his interest in peculiar characters and local vocabulary (Guðmundsson 2023, 168–70). At least three years earlier, the village had already begun to take form in Halldór's writing, thousands of kilometres away from the shores of Iceland, under the strong influence of some of the most radical contemporary art media and discourses, such as the cinema and Freudian psy-

chology. Óseyri thus reflects the contradictions inherent to its author, who was simultaneously an observant cosmopolitan and deeply devoted to his country, people, culture and language.

Halldór Guðmundsson notes that in the summer of 1926,

Halldór read Freud, Jung and Adler; these psychoanalytic texts were to make their mark on *Salka Valka* and *Independent People*. Although Halldór later rejected Freud, for instance, in *A Poet's Time* [*Skáldatími*] (1963), he was preoccupied with these theories during the 1920s and well into the 1930s. Halldór was interested both in the ways that new movements in literature like surrealism drew heavily on psychoanalysis and its theories about the unconscious, and, as might be expected at his age, in types of sexual behaviour, including homosexuality, sadism and transvestitism. (Guðmundsson 2023, 117)

Scholars such as Peter Hallberg (1971, 49–51) and Björn Þór Vilhjálmsson (2014) have discussed Freud's impact on Halldór's writings in the 1920s and 1930s, notably *The Great Weaver* and the play *Straumrof* (1934), and Halldór himself stated that he read Freud 'eagerly' from 1924 to 1930 (Laxness 1963, 53–54). Halldór Guðmundsson (2023, 137) does not spell out *how* psychoanalytic theories influence *Salka Valka*, but again briefly mentions a Freudian theme when discussing the film script Halldór wrote for Hollywood. In the case of *Salka Valka*, scholars seem to take the Freudian influence for granted, although the novel has never been studied from that perspective.⁵

A close look at *Salka Valka* and the screenplay reveals that the latter, in particular, is loaded with Freudian symbolism. It is a pitch script, written in English, and includes a section on topography, a presentation of the leading characters, a rough storyline and a description of a few scenes. As Halldór Guðmundsson (2023, 136) points out, the film was to have been silent, since Laxness was not well versed in the techniques of film-making, and the script is thus highly pictorial. The setting is an 'untidy fishing village situated on the outskirts of wild mountains on the Icelandic coast', where the fishing 'follows the same primitive methods

as were in use before the age of motors. Each boat has six rowers and a foreman. The codfish is the predominating feature in the picture of the town'.⁶ The author then describes the story as characterised by 'a charming roughness':

An atmosphere of hard struggle for life, and misery. Uncultivated passions. The characters are rude, naive and primitive. Nature is phenomenally barren and wild; the sea is usually restless and the psychology of the characters is closely tied together with this wild nature. (WP 11)

The fundamental premise of Freud's psychoanalytic theory was the division of mental life into conscious and unconscious and how the unconscious mind affected human behaviour. He proposed that the mind was composed of three elements: the id, which was largely unconscious and the basis of sexual and aggressive energy; the super-ego, a moral conscience formed via identifications with one's parents and societal expectations; and finally, the mostly conscious ego, which navigated between the demands of desire (id) and morality (super-ego) (Freud 1964). Halldór's 'eager' interest in psychoanalytic theory at the time he wrote the screenplay strongly suggests a symbolic reading based on Freud's theory of the mind: he envisions the village as the id, a stage for drama driven by 'uncultivated passions', where characters are mainly occupied with satisfying needs and desires. The correspondence between nature and the characters' psychological traits dramatises this symbolism, as the forces of nature are entirely irrational and uncontrollable. The ego has no more control over this village than a man over the weather.

Salka is then described as follows:

She is tall and strongly built. The chief ingredients of her facial expression: rustic virginity, dare-deviltry, primitive charm. She is dressed like a fisherman: wide pants, the bootlegs reaching up over the knee, a pipe in her mouth. (WP 11)

Like the village, Salka is uncultivated and led by her instincts. The first part of her story resembles the novel, except Steinþór is only present as the violent stepfather. From the day she arrives with her mother in the village, they are treated as outcasts on sexual grounds. The mother marries a man who abuses her, and when she dies, Salka is abandoned by her stepfather. A merchant family takes her in, and she has a chance to become 'a lady' but flees the house when she hears the couple fight. As in the novel, Salka decides to 'escape the fate of women' because she does not want to become like her mother and fears the societal role assigned to women. In the script, however, she has noticed that when other children play 'marriage', the 'husband' always beats the 'wife', and the explanation is that 'the women are to be beaten.' Therefore, Salka

procures an old pair of trousers, mends the rents and puts them on, cuts off her blonde curls. The next day she appears on the playground, clad as a boy. She is ridiculed for the rest of her life and challenges the boys to fight with her. She knocks them down one after another and leaves them on the ground crying. (WP 12)

The most prominent theme in Halldór's script is the emotional conflict between Salka and societal norms, particularly regarding sexual desire and gender identification – a conflict at the heart of Freud's writings in the 1910s and 20s. Freud (2000) famously argued that early childhood sexual experiences were crucial factors in the development of human personality and introduced the Oedipus complex as the basis of his theory of psychosexual development. Salka's conflict in the script is a textbook example of arrested development and an unresolved Oedipal complex according to Freud's model: she cannot identify with her mother because she fears the violence and sexual humiliation she has suffered, and she cannot learn to desire men (a father figure), since her father is absent and the stepfather is violent and dangerous. Due to the hostile conditions of her upbringing, the adult Salka is thus neither a 'proper' woman nor a man, and her gender-bending behaviour is, seen from this perspective, the result of psychosexual trauma.

Salka's aggression towards men is also a prominent theme in the film script. As an adult fisherwoman, she is 'respected and admired by some, feared by others, as she is known to be able to knock down every fellow in the place' (WP 13). Arnold (Arnaldur), who in this draft is a poor fisherman who neither leaves the village nor learns about socialism, receives her love and aggression simultaneously. He is the only boy in the village who matches her in a fight, and their relationship intensifies as they grow older until he expresses his feelings for her. He kisses her hand, and a dramatic scene unfolds:

For a moment she is quivering with passion. Then suddenly her stepfather's devoted courtship to her mother comes to her mind. Horrified by this memory, Salka Valka pushes Arnold violently away from her. For the following moments they stand suddenly in front of each other as two enemies, resembling two wild beasts on the point of tearing each other to pieces. Then he assails her in a kind of bestial rapture. For a moment they fight brutally and violently. There is something voluptuous about this fight – during the fight he presses brutal kisses on her lips. (WP 16)

The fusion of such contradictory feelings – ambivalence – is characteristic of Freud's Oedipal complex, as children feel both love and hate towards their parents before they learn to identify with the same sex and sexually desire the opposite sex. Moreover, the love and hate Salka and Arnaldur feel towards each other – another prominent theme in Halldór's script – represent what Freud (1955) called Eros and Thanatos, the two basic instincts that constantly pull and push the individual towards life and death, preservation and destruction.

The novel *Salka Valka* is, in every respect, a more nuanced and complicated work, and as a result, it is mainly free of the blatant references to Freud that are evident in the script. There are, however, certain Freudian threads that can be traced through the novel. Salka's aggression is tempered, but her emotional life is undoubtedly marked by ambivalence and tension between opposite forces, as noted earlier. During her first months in Óseyri, she wanted to 'beat [the children] to a pulp and spit

on them' (SV 133) when they called her names, but her hatred towards them soon evaporated, and she is never involved in a physical fight – except with Steinþór and Arnaldur. As teenagers, the tension between her and Arnaldur breaks out in a fray, during which they are simultaneously angry and full of desire (SV 103–104), and in the novel's second volume, she fights Steinþór with the same wild passion as she does with Arnold in the script (SV 440).

The most fundamental shifts between script and novel are, firstly, Steinþór's entry into Salka's story and, secondly, the maturity of her character. In the script, Salka is untamed and closely connected to nature and its forces, as manifested in this dramatic scene after she has fought Arnold:

She runs out of his arms into the blizzard. He runs senselessly after her. Wild with terror she runs to the shore, where she finds a small boat, jumps into it, rows out, and disappears in the furious breakers. Night. Blizzard. The sea in fury. (Here the story culminates.) (WP 16)

In the novel, however, Steinþór is the one who merges with nature and the village, as was outlined in a previous section. He even sometimes emerges as an avatar of the Freudian id, primitive and untamed:

[H]is torpid voice ... had a peculiar hypnotic effect and enclosed his interlocutors like a world of its own with sky and sea, and in the midst of its sharp, salty, grey frigidity, his eyes burned, wild and unprincipled, like the very picture of an unselfconscious life that gives nothing a second thought and has no other goal than to exist, without paying heed to either the past or the future. (SV 14–15)

As such, Steinþór represents one of the extremes that pull Salka in different directions – the other is Arnaldur, who in the novel has become the one who 'knows the ways of the world'. The novel's Salka, on the other hand, evades such straightforward interpretation.

The unknown in Salka's being

Freud's psychoanalytic theory is, of course, highly problematic, not least from a queer perspective, since its model for normal psychosexual development is the heterosexual family, and any aberrations are linked with failure to adapt to heteronormativity. He has also been criticised for not distinguishing between drives and affects and thus for fusing a child's love and affection for their parents with their sex drive (Tomkins 1995, 60). However, Freud's contribution to modernist thought and writing in the early twentieth century cannot be dismissed. His theory of psychosexual development, for example, was revolutionary in the sense that it presupposed that everyone had perverse desires (Kahan 2013, 354). In the essay on narcissism, Freud also underlined – in a problematic, yet queer, way – that all people initially desire the same sex.⁷ Moreover, Michael Levenson notes that psychoanalysis's emphasis on case studies and patients who talk without premeditation or self-censorship influenced modernist writers and artists to a great extent. The self was narrativised and 'a new metaphysics of character' emerged: 'Character is the precipitate of fantasies, desires and dreads; it is an overlay of past and present; it possesses an inexhaustible convergence of meanings' (Levenson 2011, 83). Such emphasis on the complexities and contradictions within the human psyche is notably at the core of Halldór's novels.

Salka Valka draws a much more profound and complex picture of Salka's problematic relationship with her mother and her gender than does the film script. The first night at Steinþór's house is a watershed moment, as she realises that when her mother leaves the bed they share, that they are no longer one. Earlier that night, Sigurlína had told Salka, responding to her suspicion that Steinþór might desire the girl more than her, that they were 'two girls' who had to be good to each other. Salka finds it challenging to get her head around the idea that they are no longer little Salka and Mama. Still, lying alone in bed, she realises that 'this woman was not first and foremost little Salka's Mama, but rather, that she also had a life of her own while Salka slept, a life of which Salka Valka could have had no inkling' (SV 68). Separation from the mother is inherent to the individual's psychosocial maturity and development

of normative sexuality, according to Freud, and Halldór's emphasis on this moment of realisation for Salka is one of the most apparent psychoanalytic references in the novel. The separation is excruciating for Salka and can be seen as the primary motive behind her actions from that day on – regardless of whether we read it from a Freudian perspective or not.⁸ The situation becomes traumatic when Steinþór assaults Salka and brings violence, pain, poverty and sorrow to their family, culminating in her baby brother, who languishes and dies of malnutrition and cold.⁹ As a result, Salka renounces the role of women, especially everything that has to do with relationships with men, marriage and childbearing – in other words, with sexual desire and its consequences.

However, reducing Salka's gender expression, gender identity and sexuality in the novel to a symbolic Freudian reading would be misleading. A queer analysis reveals, for example, that her fear of her own body and sexual arousal is a complex and very queer matter:

It was the unknown in her being that frightened her, the mystery that had been the cause of her fear of life from the time that she first came to understand her mother's nature, the woman who had lived and died so sadly and shamefully for love. In the vicinity of the unknown world that comprised life, shame, and death, her consciousness rebelled involuntarily. (SV 507)

This 'mystery' in her being could be seen as unresolved Oedipal trauma or the result of Steinþór's sexual assault – but I argue that it is queerness. There are no apparent signs of same-sex desire in Salka, but heterosexual desire terrifies her or, rather, its consequences and the heteronormative way of life. The 'unknown world' that Salka fears, which comprises 'life, shame, and death', is the social world of sexual regulation, where everything sexual that does not fall within the frame of monogamous, heterosexual marriage is considered shameful and can bring death to women and children. Refraining from heterosexuality does not comprise homosexuality or any other sexual identities, however, and Salka's renunciation of womanhood does not necessarily designate that she is

trans. Such attempts to define her identity would be inapt, as her life is primarily marked by her fight for independence from identification. She simply 'is what she is'.

In her queer analysis of *Salka Valka*, Jenna Grace Sciuto (2025, 80–112) reads Salka within the frame of the tomboy – a girl who embraces female masculinity because it gives her agency in a world where the female gender norm is a place of constriction. Sciuto notes that some of Salka's tomboy characteristics are genetic or result from her social status, while others are chosen aspects of her identity. Sciuto argues that her tomboy performances, such as wearing pants, cutting her hair short and working independently as a fisherwoman, are acts of disidentification, which, in José Esteban Muñoz's terms, are 'the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship' (Muñoz 1999, 4). Minority subjects who disidentify from the normative society do not strictly oppose or rebel against the norm. Still, they do not identify with it either, since there is a dissonance between their identity and the social roles made available to them (Muñoz 1999, 5). Sciuto (2025, 20) points out that Salka disidentifies 'from traditional understandings of what it means to be a girl in [her] societ[y] to carve out [her] own space within the confines of gender roles'. In other words, she never seeks to become a man; she just doesn't want to be the woman that society expects her to be. Along the same lines, Salka disidentifies from heterosexuality and heteronormative expectations. Regardless of whether 'the mystery' inside her is an inherent characteristic or caused by psychological trauma, her retreat is a strategy to survive in a world where non-normative sexuality is stigmatised and heterosexual sex can have grave consequences.

Additionally, the conclusions of both script and novel are queer, as they underline Salka's disidentification from societal expectations and her determined belief and reliance on herself. Again, the film script is blatantly symbolic. Its final scene occurs in Arnold's house, where Salka makes herself at home while he is still at sea. She 'fingers with his things'

and feeds his horses, which is an act of power, as she is a successful foreman while he is a lousy fisherman. She then sees Arnald's horsewhip, symbolising his masculinity and social status, as 'an Icelandic whip of artistic make is a matter of pride to every Icelandic horseman' (WP 13). Salka claims she will 'stay in this house until the owner comes and chases me out with this whip' (WP 17). Next, she 'folds out before her the double leather straps of the whip, kissing it with all the voluptuousness and pathos of the primitive' (WP 18). The whip has become a phallus, a symbol of masculine agency and social status, loaded with sexual tension. Salka's queer performance culminates in this final scene, as she grabs a phallus that is not hers to possess and simultaneously acts upon her 'primitive' sexual desires. The importance of this ultimate Freudian symbol is underlined in the third title Halldór suggested for the film, in addition to *Salka Valka* and *A Woman in Pants* – a title that has hitherto been wholly overlooked: *The Icelandic Whip* (WP 11).

The phallus in *Salka Valka*, on the other hand, is both objective and subjective. No horsewhip appears in the novel, but when Salka throws Steinþór out of the house, she threatens him with a knife, symbolising her power as she refuses to accept his love and offer to take care of her financially. This same power is also at stake when Salka ends her affair with Arnaldur. With him, she has overcome her fear of sexual desire and entered into a heterosexual relationship, which could have resulted in marriage. However, she chooses autonomy and takes the definitional power into her own hands. Neither script nor novel thus offers its readers a happy, heteronormative ending.



Figure 1: Captain Þuríður (Þuríður formaður). Drawing by Finnur Guðmundsson. National Museum of Iceland.

Women in pants

Salka Valka belongs to a time-honoured local tradition of rural and lower-class women by the Icelandic seaside who wore ‘men’s clothes’ while working in fisheries. Although fishing was primarily considered a man’s job, farm labourers of all genders were expected to fish for their farms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it was not unheard of for women to work as fisherwomen. Clothing was essential for survival at sea, and all anglers wore a leather coat; under this, women often wore two wool skirts that could get very heavy and wet, making falling overboard even more lethal than it was for men. Thus, some fisherwomen wore trousers for convenience and practicality (Willson 2016, 29–35).

In an article on queer sexualities and genders in Iceland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Íris Ellenberger and Hafdís Erla Hafsteinsdóttir discuss written sources about women who differed from the norm in terms of, for example, gender expression, physical appearance or lifestyle, and among them are several notions of seawomen. The sources – typically written by men – describe large and robust women considered hard workers and physical equals to men. They are also, however, often described as ugly or unattractive, and their choice to wear pants is used to underline their strangeness or highlight their abnormal sexuality. Among them is the best-known fisherwoman of the nineteenth century, Þuríður Einarsdóttir, who was a foreman on a boat and notorious for wearing men’s clothing not only when working at sea (Ellenberger & Hafsteinsdóttir 2022, 88–91; Willson 2023).

A famous nineteenth-century drawing of Þuríður links her to Salka Valka, as it depicts her wearing her usual attire – long coat, pants and hat – while holding a familiar phallic symbol: an Icelandic horsewhip. Moreover, a comparison between the depiction of Þuríður in the chronicles and Salka strongly suggests that Þuríður was an inspiration for Halldór when he was writing both film script and novel. Þuríður is described as quick-witted, steady and unsparing; like Salka, she is said to have had a peculiar face, a harsh voice and – last but not least – ‘her whole gesture portrayed unusual vitality’ (Jónsson 1893, 2). Both begin working in fisheries at age 11 and later operate their own boats. Þuríður is engaged

or married three times but resents being dependent on others – whether husbands or employers – and spends the last decades of her life single. As Ellenberger and Hafsteinsdóttir point out, her ‘independent gender-bending ways and manners get in the way of her becoming a proper wife’ (Ellenberger & Hafsteinsdóttir 2022, 90), and her story, like Salka’s, has a queer ending as she carves out her own permanent space within gendered norms and social expectations where she operates independently.

Salka’s character is thus rooted in local queer history and culture. At the same time, however, her disidentification from heteronormative ways of being is a transnational modernist matter. The most established narrative that links modernism with queer sexuality in Western culture is the historical relationship between the modern concept of homosexuality and the ‘birth’ of the homosexual individual on the one hand and the classical period of modernism on the other (Caserio 2010, 199–204; Love 2009, 745). Moreover, the ‘sexual modernisation’ of Western societies and culture – the emergence of sexology, psychoanalysis and various studies of human biology and physiology – became a matter of interest to modernist artists like Halldór. In his exploration of queer modernism, Robert L. Caserio emphasises the *queerness* – rather than homosexuality as a fixed identity – inherent to modernism’s revolutionary challenge:

The modernist construction of homosexuality evolves from an alliance of plural erotic dispositions that are united in antagonism to opposite-sex love, bourgeois marriage, and family. To emphasise homosexuality as a product of medical and juridical innovations is to overlook the alliance. It also overlooks modernist homosexuality’s derivation from ideologies that characterize queer persons as standard bearers of culture and as paragons of democratic citizenship. (Caserio 2010, 201)

Homosexuality is thus originally much queerer than our current understanding of it. It is ‘a queer force’ that emerges as a part of modernism’s challenge, Caserio (2010, 203) notes, a challenge which is ‘so comprehensive that [it] seeks to break with religion, nationality and the state’.

This discussion of queer modernism effectively captures the radicality of Halldór Laxness's work in the late 1920s, including *Salka Valka*, in relation to gender and sexuality. He was inspired by Marxist criticism – yet another crucial modernist set of discourses – and when he returned to Iceland from the U.S. in 1929, he had become an outspoken socialist. This is evident in *Alþýðubókin* (*The Book of the People*), a collection of Halldór's political writings published in 1929, as well as other articles from the period, in which he attacks bourgeois thought and politics and takes a radical stand as a defender of women's rights and societal reform. The Marxist feminism that echoes in Halldór's writings, most notably in 'Drengjakollurinn og íslenska konan' ('The bob and the Icelandic woman') and 'Karl, kona, barn' ('Man, woman, child'), is inherently queer, although it does not mention homosexuality. There he attacks the idea of marriage as the one proper frame for love, sex and family. Bourgeois marriage fosters 'true adultery,' he says, which is when man and woman get bored with each other but stay married for the sake of morality and lifelong commitment. He claims that sexual passion is healthy and normal and that both men and women should satisfy their desires. A marriage that is based on sexual passion is doomed, however, and love is also pointless if it is not between equals (Laxness 1955, 160–83). Focusing on the status of women, Halldór criticises 'the advocates of the past' who resist modernisation and emphasises that Icelanders need to participate in the ongoing international gender revolution. The past treated women as childbearing machines and sexual beings with the sole purpose of procreation, he says. On the other hand, the modern woman participates in public activities and cares about cultural matters, but childrearing and housekeeping lie outside her field. She does not see herself as the man's malformed double or his marionette; 'above all, she is his intellectual companion, his equal as well as his date, his friend as well as his lover' (Laxness 1925b, 5).

Salka Valka refuses to be a childbearing machine and demands the right to self-determination and autonomy. In this respect, she is a modern woman, and yet she is not. In the novel, queer, feminist, Marxist or other modernist discourses do not inspire Salka's opinions on female

gender roles – these ideas originate within herself. She differs from young women who follow fashion and endorse the ‘New Woman’ look. For example, the merchant, Jóhann Bogesen, tells Salka that her trousers and short-cut hair are unbecoming. When she reminds him that his daughter, Ágústa, also has short hair, he replies: ‘Yes, but isn’t that something entirely different? She is married to a naval officer in Copenhagen’ (SV 295). Bourgeois women who follow heteronormative scripts can have bobbed hair and wear pants without causing a great stir. Salka, however, is no such woman. She renounces bourgeois femininity and sexuality in a modern and queer manner while remaining simultaneously rooted in the age-old tradition of fisherwomen, who find their own path within the patriarchal societies of the past. This is no coincidence, and indeed, no contradiction: for Halldór, Icelandic folk history and culture were just as important an inspiration as contemporary literature and politics.

*Figure 2: Greta Garbo in the film Anna Karenina (1935).
Photo licence: Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo / Alamy Stock Photo*

Conclusion

When Halldór was in Los Angeles writing the screenplay that later became *Salka Valka*, he had a particular actress in mind for the leading role. His favourite actress, Greta Garbo, was working for MGM, the studio interested in Halldór’s script, and to him, she was the ideal Salka (Gudmundsson 2023, 137). Besides being a talented actress, Garbo challenged traditional gender roles by wearing ‘men’s clothes’, such as pants and a white shirt, which presumably affected Halldór’s interest in her as Salka. Moreover, she had love affairs with both men and women, and in the early 1930s, she was entangled with a German actress, Salka Viertel, who became her acting coach and with whom she worked on the biofilm about the Swedish – and queer – *Queen Christina* (1933).¹⁰ It is tempting to deduce that Halldór named his protagonist after Garbo’s queer lover, and yet the time frame does not fit: Viertel arrived in Hollywood in 1928 when Halldór was already writing the screenplay, and he



left in 1929 before Viertel and Garbo grew close (Guðmundsson 2004, 230–31).

This fascinating coincidence nevertheless captures the paradoxes and ambiguous relationships between local and global, tradition and modernity, represented in *Salka Valka* – as well as its queer force. This article has outlined how Salka, like the village Óseyri, is rural, solitary and ‘typically’ Icelandic – but at the same time full of current ideas and transnational connections, combining, for example, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Marxist feminism, cinematic art and the local cultural history of fisherwomen. Halldór’s screenplay and novel manifest his interest in human sexuality and psychology as well as his dedication to what has been referred to here as queer modernism – the sexually transgressive and gender-deviant energies that mark his fiction and nonfiction writings about the modern way of life (Benediktsdóttir 2022b). These writings resemble, at times, present-day queer critique, where the emphasis is not on homosexual rights but on deconstructing heteronormativity, the endeavour to enclose human sexuality and gender expression within the family cell and the constitution of marriage, where petty moral codes apply.

Writing about queer sexuality or gender fluidity as a part of Icelandic society and culture in a positive manner, like Halldór did in the 1920s, amounted, in the eyes of many, to attacking the Icelandic nation and its morality. This was manifested in the reception of *The Great Weaver*, which was praised by some, while others considered it immoral trash. Jenna Grace Scioto (2025, 83) notes that ‘the ways in which queerness is represented [in fiction] are significant to discussions of Iceland’s colonial history and national identity’; she suggests a reading of *Salka* as a metaphor for Iceland’s colonial liminality. The preceding discussion supports such an analysis: *Salka* is, like Iceland in 1930, torn between the extremes of modernisation and tradition and an arena for dramatic personal and political conflicts. The novel’s conclusion is that *Salka*/Iceland chooses independence without identifying with nationalist ideologies – she disidentifies from traditions and conservatism as well as modernisation. This is a vision for Iceland’s future Halldór shared with

the international socialist movement in the 1930s, as Árni Sigurjónsson (1986, 99–100) has outlined: he rebelled against conservative Icelandic nationalism and its emphasis on rural culture, and yet he cared deeply for the nation, its history and culture. He wanted a different kind of future than the conservative nationalists had to offer, and Salka Valka can be seen as the incarnation of his vision: the woman who disidentifies from all authorities and takes the phallus into her own hands.

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NOTES

1. This article is a part of the research project "From Sexual Outlaws to Model Citizens: The Relations Between Sexualities and Nationality in Iceland 1944–2010," hosted at the University of Iceland and funded by the Icelandic Research Fund (no. 206625-053).
2. In this article, the term *queer* refers to people, practices, discourses and other phenomena that resist or do not conform to *heteronormativity* (Warner 1991). Queer is thus not a 'sexual' term exclusively; its scope is directed against social and cultural structures and modes of thinking that privilege and idealise 'the heterosexual way of life.'
3. Discussing *Salka Valka* within the frame of modernism is not uncontested (see e.g. Helgason 2020, 31–33). This article builds on a broad understanding of modernism as an endeavour to deal with and respond to the modern situation via art or other means of expression. Such an endeavour includes, for example, Marx's political theory, Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and the sexology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Literary texts that take on a modernist project may, hence, be realist in terms of style and representation (see e.g. Berman 2011, 7–8; Love 2006, 19; Heaney 2017, 6; Moberg 2014).
4. Laxness (2022, 8). All references to *Salka Valka* in this article, indicated with SV and page numbers in brackets, are to this first complete English translation of the novel.

5. Already in 1936, J.J. (1936), a reviewer writing for the newspaper *Nýja dagblaðið*, criticised Halldór for letting the ‘learned wisdom’ of ‘Freud the psychopathologist’ overpower his fiction in *Salka Valka*.
6. Laxness (2004, 11). The pitch script was published in *Tímarit Máls og menningar* in 2004, with a preface by Halldór Guðmundsson. All references to the script are hereafter indicated with *WP* and page numbers in brackets.
7. Freud (2001). On the complexities of Freud’s notion of identification and the individual’s psychosexual development, for example, from a queer perspective, see Fuss (1995).
8. Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir (1992) reaches the same conclusion without (directly) applying Freudian concepts in her article on the relationship between Salka and her mother.
9. On sexual violence against children in Halldór Laxness’s work, including *Salka Valka*, see Dagný Kristjánsdóttir (2023).
10. See Banner (2023), chapters 7–10.